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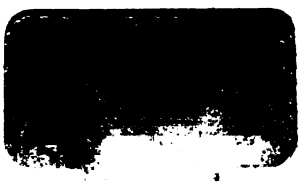

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A NOVEL

BY

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A-Q

TO

ROBERT H. DAVIS

WITH AFFECTIONATE ADMIRATION

CLIPPED WINGS

CLIPPED WINGS

CHAPTER I

THE proud lady in the new runabout was homeward bound from a shopping raid. It was her first voyage down-town alone with the thing. She guided the old family horse up to her curb in a graceful sweep, but, like a new elevator-boy, could not come to a stop at the stopping-place.

She could go forward or back, but she could not exactly negotiate her own stepping-block. As she blushingly struggled for it she heard the scream of a child in desperate terror. It inspired an equal terror, for it came from her own house.

She had left her two children at home, expecting playmate guests. She had extracted from them every imaginable promise to be good and to abstain from danger. But she knew how easily they romped into perils. She heard the cry again, and clutched her breast in a little death of fear as she half leaped, half toppled from her carriage and ran up the walk, leaving the horse to his own devices.

The poor woman was wondering which of her beloved had fallen on the shears or into the fire. Which of the dogs had gone mad, and bitten whom. While she stumbled up the steps she heard the outcry repeated and she paused.

That voice was the voice of neither of her own children. The thought that a neighbor's child might have perished in her home was almost more fearful still. As she fumbled at the door-knob she heard the thud of a little falling body. Then there was a most dreadful silence.

She hastened to the big living-room. She thrust back the somber hanging, and stepped on the arm of her own son.

He was lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. He did not move, though his wrist rolled under her foot.

She flinched away, sickened, only to behold a yet ghastlier spectacle: her daughter hung across the arm of a couch, her hair over her face, and one limp hand touching the floor. At her feet was a young nephew in a contorted huddle with his head under the table. The son of a neighbor was stretched out on a chair, his face flung far back and his eyes staring.

And on the panther-skin by the fireplace a young girl whom Mrs. Vickery had never seen before lay sidelong, singularly beautiful in death.

Before this vision of inconceivable horror the mother stood petrified, her throat in the grip of such fright that she could not utter a sound. Then her knees yielded and she sank to the side of her boy, clutched him to her breast, and cried:

"Eugene! my little 'Gene!"

She pressed her palsied lips to his cheek. Thank God, it was still warm. He moved, he thrust her arms away, and mumbled. She bent to catch the words:

"Lea' me alone! I'm dead!"

With a sigh of infinite relief she spilled him back to the rug, where he lay motionless. She called sharply to the girl on the couch:

"Dorothy! Dorothy!"

A tremor ran through the child—she seemed to struggle with herself. From her cataract of curls came a sound as of torn canvas, a sound dangerously like one of those ex-

plosions of snicker that Dorothy frequently emitted in church during the long prayer. But she did not look up.

Half angry, half ecstatic, Mrs. Vickery rose and moved among the littered corpses, like Edith looking for King Harold's body on Hastings field. She passed by her nephew, Tommy Jerrems, and Mrs. Burbage's boy, Clyde, and proceeded to the eerie stranger on the panther-skin.

This child would have looked deader if she had not been breathing so hard, and if her exquisite face had not been so scarlet in the tangle of her hair, which was curiously adorned with bottle-straw and excelsior from a packing-case in the cellar and with artificial flowers from a last-summer's hat of Mrs. Vickery's in the attic.

Mrs. Vickery bent above the panting ruins, lifted one relaxed hand, and inquired, "And who are you, little girl?"

"Don't touch me, please; I'm all wet!"

Mrs. Vickery forgot her imagination long enough to expostulate, "Why, no, you're not, my dear!"

And now the eyes opened with the answer: "Oh yes, I am, if you please. I've just drownded myself in the pool here—if you please."

"Oh!" Mrs. Vickery assented. "Well, hadn't you better get up before you catch cold?"

The answer to this question was another—a poser.

"But how can I get up, if you please, until you lower the curtain?"

Mrs. Vickery had been a parent often enough and long enough to obey the solemn behests of children without impertinent whys. She could not imagine what incantational power might reside in the roller window-shade, but she hurried to it and pulled it down.

The little girl scrambled to her feet with a smile of brave regret: "Thank you ever so much! That's not a 'maginary curtain, but only a real one. Still, it will

have to do, I s'pose." Then she addressed the other victims of fate, all of whom were craning their necks to peek: "Now, ladies and gent'men, take your curtain calls."

On every hand, as at a little local Judgment Day, the dead arose. They joined hands in a line at her signal. Then she hissed from the side of her mouth, "Now raise it, please." The curtain shot up with a slap. "Thank you. And if you wouldn't mind applaudin' a little."

The reaction from her terror had rendered Mrs. Vickery almost hysterical, but she managed to keep her face straight and her hands busy while the line bowed and bowed.

Once more the directress whispered to Mrs. Vickery, "Pull the curtain down a minute, please, and let it go up again." When this was done she said, "If you got any flowers handy, they'd be nice."

Mrs. Vickery unpinned a small bouquet of violets she had presented herself with at the florist's and tossed it at the foot of the swaying line.

The directress hissed from the other side of her mouth, "Pick 'em up, 'Gene, and give 'em to me."

Eugene stooped so hastily and with such rigidity of knee that an over-tried button at the back of his knickers shot across the room. Dorothy, who had not ceased to giggle, whooped with joy at this, and received a glare of rebuke from the star. This did not silence Dorothy. But then her parents had tried for nine years to find some way of making her stop laughing without making her begin to cry.

Eugene was solemn enough and blushed to his ears as he bestowed the flowers upon the stranger, who first motioned the others back and then acknowledged the tribute alone with profound courtesies to Mrs. Vickery and to unseen and unheard plauditors at the right and left. Her smile was the bizarre parody of innocence imitating sophistication. Then she threw off the mien of

artifice and became informal and a child again. The game was evidently over.

Mrs. Vickery, realizing now that she was the belated audience at a tragedy, assumed her most lion-hunting manner and pleaded, meekly, "Won't somebody please introduce me to Mrs. Siddons!"

Dorothy gasped with amazement and gulped with amusement at her mother's stupidity. But before she could make the presentation the stranger cried:

"Oh, how did you know?"

"Know what, my dear?"

"That my name was Siddons!"

"Is it, really? But I was referring to the famous actress. She's been dead for a hundred years, I think."

"Oh yes, but I'm named after her. My middle name is Mrs. Siddons—of course I mean just Siddons. I'm a linyural descender from her."

Dorothy broke in, seriously enough now: "Why, Sheila Kemble, how you talk! You know you're no such thing. Your name is Kemble. Isn't it, Clyde?"

Clyde nodded and Dorothy exclaimed, "Yah!"

Dorothy had not the faintest idea who Mrs. Siddons might be, save that she was evidently a person of distinction, but Dorothy had a child's ferocious resentment at seeing any one else obtaining prestige under false pretenses. Sheila regarded her with a grandmotherly pity and answered:

"My name is Kemble, yes; but if you know so much, Miss Smarty-cat, you ought to know that Mrs. Siddons's name was Miss Kemble before she married Mr. Siddons." And now in her turn she added the deadly "Yah!"

Mrs. Vickery, in the office of peacemaker, tried to change the subject: "'Sheila'—what a beautiful name!" she cried. "It's Irish, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. My papa says that if you're a great actor you have to have a streak of either Irish or Jew in you!"

"Indeed! And is your father a great actor?"

"Is he? Ask him!"

Mrs. Vickery was tormented with an intuitional suspicion that she was in the presence of a stage-child. She had never met one on the hither side of the footlights. It was uncanny to stumble upon it dressed like other children and playing among them as a child. There was a kind of weirdness about the encounter as if she had found a goblin or a pixie in the living-room, or a waif suspected of scarlet fever.

It was she and not the pixie that felt the embarrassment! The first defense of a person in confusion is usually a series of questions, and Mrs. Vickery was reduced to asking:

"What sort of plays does your father play?"

"Draw'n-room commerdies mostly. People call 'em Roger Kemble parts."

Mrs. Vickery spoke with a sudden increase of respect:

"So your father is the great Roger Kemble! And is your mother an actress, too?"

"Is my mother an actress? Why, Mrs. Vickery, didn't you ever hear of Miss Polly Farren?"

It would have been hard indeed to escape the name of Miss Polly Farren. It was incessantly visible in newspapers and magazines, and on bill-boards in letters a yard high, with colossal portraits attached. Mrs. Vickery had seen Polly Farren act. A girlish, hoydenish thing she was, who made even the women laugh and love her. Mrs. Vickery felt at first a pride in meeting any relative of hers. Then a chill struck her. She lowered her voice lest the children hear:

"But Miss Farren isn't your mother?"

"Indeed and she is! And I'm her daughter."

"And Roger Kemble is your father?"

"Yes, indeedy. We're all each other's."

Mrs. Vickery turned dizzy; the room began to roll like

a merry-go-round—without the merriment. Sheila, never realizing the whirl she had started, brought it to a sudden and gratifying stop by her next chatter.

"You see, when mamma married papa" (Mrs. Vickery's relief was audible) "they wanted to travel as Mr. and Mrs. Kemble, but the wicked old manager objected. He said mamma's name was a household word, and she was worth five hunderd a week as Polly Farren and she wasn't worth seventy-five as Mrs. Kemble."

Mrs. Vickery, whose husband was proud of his hundred a week, was awestruck at the thought of a woman who earned five hundred.

Of course it was wicked money, but wasn't there a lot of it? She was reassured wonderfully, and, though a trifle tinged with shame for her curiosity, she baited the child with another question:

"And have you been on the stage, too?"

"Indeed, I have! Oh yes, Mrs. Vickery. I was almost born on the stage—they tell me. I don't 'member much about it myself. But I 'member bein' carried on when I was very young. They tell me I behaved perf'ly beau'fully. And then once I was one of the little princes that got smothered in the Tower, at a benefit, and then once we childern gave a childern's performance of 'The Rivals.' And I was Mrs. Mallerpop."

Mrs. Vickery shook her head over her in pity and sighed, "You poor child!"

Sheila gasped, "Oh, Mrs. Vickery!" Her eyes were enlarged with wonder and protest as if she had been struck in the face.

Mrs. Vickery hastened to explain: "To be kept up so late, I mean: and—and—weren't you frightened to death of all those people?"

"Frightened? Why, they wouldn't hurt me. They always applauded me and said, 'Oh, isn't she sweet!'"

Mrs. Vickery had read much about the woes of factory children and of the little wretches who toil in the coal-

mines, and she had heard of the agitation to forbid the appearance of children on the stage. The tradition of misery was so strong that she was blinded for the moment to the extraordinary beauty, vigor, and vivacity of this example. She felt sorry for her.

Sheila had encountered such mysterious pity once or twice before and she flamed to resent it. But even as eloquence rushed to her lips she remembered her mother's last words as she kissed her good-by—they had been an injunction to be polite at all costs.

The struggle to defend her mother's glory and to obey her mother's self-denying ordinance was so bitter that it squeezed a big tear out of each big eye.

Mrs. Vickery, seeming to divine the secret of her plight, cuddled her to her breast with a gush of affectionate homage. Reassured by this surrender, Sheila became again a child.

And now Dorothy, with that professional jealousy which actors did not invent and do not monopolize, that jealousy which is seen in animals and read of in gods—Dorothy stood aloof and pouted at the invader of her mother's lap. Her lip crinkled and she batted out a few tears of her own till her mother stretched forth an arm and made a haven for her at her bosom. Then Mrs. Vickery spoke between the two wet cheeks pressed to hers:

"And now what was this wonderful game where so many people got killed? Was it a war or a shipwreck or—or what?"

Sheila forgot her tears in the luxury of instructing an elder. With unmitigated patronage, as who in her turn should say, "You poor thing, you!" she exclaimed: "Why, don't you know? It's the last ack of 'Hamlet!'"

"Oh, I see! Of course! How perfectly stupid of me!"

Sheila endeavored to comfort her: "Oh no, it wasn't stupid a tall, Mrs. Vickery, if you'll pardon me for cont'-

adictin', but—well, you see, we got no real paduction, no costumes or scenery or anything."

Mrs. Vickery said: "That doesn't matter; but who was who? You see, I got in so late the usher didn't give me a program."

Sheila was rejoiced at this collaboration in the game. She explained: "Oh, the p'ograms didn't arrive in time from the pwinter, and so we had a 'nouncement made before the curtain. He's a most un'liable pwinter and I sent the usher for the p'ograms and he never came back. 'Gene was Hamlet and he was awful good. He read the silloloquy out of the book there. He reads very well. And Dorothy was his mother, the Queen, and she was awful good, too—very good, indeed, 'ceptin' for gigglin' in the serious parts, and after she was dead."

Dorothy giggled and wriggled again, to show how it was done. After this interruption was quelled Sheila went on:

"Tommy Jerrems was Laertes and he was awful good. The duel with 'Gene was terrible. I'm afraid one of your umbrellás was bent—the poisoned one. Tommy didn't want to die and I had to hit him with a hassock, and then he was so long dyin', he held up the whole paformance. But he was very good. And Cousin Clyde he was the wicked King, and he was awful good, but then, o' course, he comes of our family, and you'd naturally expeck him to be good."

Mrs. Vickery suppressed a gasp of protest from Dorothy, who was intolerant of self-advertisement, and said: "But you were dead, too, Sheila. Who were you?"

"Why, I was Ophelia, o' course!"

"Oh! But I thought Ophelia died long before the rest, and was buried, and Hamlet and Laertes fought in her grave, and—"

"Oh yes, that's the way it is in the old book. But I fixed it up so's Ophelia only p'tended to die—or, no, I

mean they thought she was dead, and they buried another lady, thinkin' she was her—and all the while Ophelia is away in a kind of a—a—insanitarum gettin' cured up. And she comes home in the last ack to s'prise everybody, and she enters, laughing, and says, 'Well, caitiffs and fellow-countrymen, I'm well again!' And she sees everybody lyin' around dead—and then she goes mad all over again and drownds herself in the big swimmin'-pool—or I guess it's a—a fountain—near the throne."

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Vickery. "That sounds ever so much better."

"Well," said Sheila, shrugging her impudent little shoulders like any other jackanapes of a reviser, "as my papa says, 'It sort of knits things together better and bolsters up the finish.' You know it's kind of bad to leave the leading lady out of the last ack. It makes the audience mad, you know."

"Yes, I know! And was it you who screamed so at the end of the play?"

Sheila hung her head and tugged at a button on Mrs. Vickery's waist as she confessed: "Well, I did my best. O' course I'm not very good—yet."

Dorothy was so matter-of-fact that she would not tolerate even self-depreciation. She exploded:

"Why, Sheila Kemble, you are so! She was wonderful, mamma! And she was so mad crazy she gave me the creeps. And when finally she plounced down and died, all us other deaders sat up and felt so scared we fell over again. She went mad simply lovely."

And Tommy Jerrems added his posy: "I bet you could 'a' heard her holler for three blocks."

"I bet I did!" Mrs. Vickery sighed, remembering the fright she had had from that edged cry.

The other children fell into a wrangle celebrating Sheila as a person of amazing learning, powers of make-believe and command, and Sheila, throned on Mrs. Vickery's

lap, sat twisting her fingers in the pleasant confusion of one who is too truthful to deny and too modest to confess a splendid achievement. Now and then she heaved the big lids from her eyes and Mrs. Vickery read there rapture, deprecation, appeal for applause, superiority to flattery, self-confidence, and meekness. And Mrs. Vickery felt that those eyes were born to persuade, to charm, to thrill and compel.

At last Mrs. Vickery said, mainly for politeness' sake, "I wish I could have seen the performance."

The hint threw a bombshell of energy into the troupe. The mummers all began to dance and stamp and shriek, "Oh, let's do it again! Let's! Oh, let's!"

Every one shouted but Sheila. Her silence silenced the others at last. She already knew enough to be silent when others were noisy and to shriek when others were silent. Then like a leaderless army the children urged her to take the crown.

Sheila thought earnestly, but shook her head: "It isn't diggenafied to play two a day." This evoked such a tomblike sigh that she relented a trifle: "We might call this other one a matinée, though, and call the other one a evening paformance."

This was agreed to with ululation. The children set to gathering up the disjected equipment, the deadly umbrellas, and the envenomed cup. The last was a golf prize of Mr. Vickery's. Dropped from the nerveless hand of the dying king, it had received a bruised lip and a profound dimple.

With the humming-bird instinct, the children stood tremulously poised before one flower only a moment, then flashed to another. It was a proposal by Tommy Jerrems that called them away now.

Tommy Jerrems had frequently revealed little glints of financial promise. He had been a notorious keeper of lemonade-stands, a frequent bankrupt, a getter-up

of circuses, and a zealous impresario of baseball games in which he did all the work and got none of the play. He was of a useful but unenviable type and would undoubtedly become in later life a dozen or more unsalaried treasurers and secretaries to various organizations.

Tommy Jerrems proposed that the play of "Hamlet" should be enacted at his mother's house as a regular entertainment with a fixed price of admission. This project was hailed with riotous enthusiasm, and King Claudius turned a cart-wheel in the general direction of a potted palm—and potted it.

There was some excitement over the restoration of this alien verdure, and Mrs. Vickery was glad that her own home had not been re-elected as playhouse. She made a mild protest on behalf of Mrs. Jerrems, but she was assailed with so frenzied a horde of suppliants that she capitulated; at least she gave her consent that Dorothy and Eugene might take part.

There was a strenuous Austrian parliament now upon a number of matters. Somehow, out of the chaos, it was gradually agreed that there should be real costumes as well as what Sheila called "props." She explained that this included gold crowns, scepters, thrones, swords, helmets, spears, and what not.

Suddenly Sheila let out another of those heart-stopping shrieks of hers. She had been struck by a very lightning of inspiration. She seized Tommy as if she would rend him in pieces and howled: "Oh, Tommy, Tommy, Tommy! You ask your mother to have the bath-tub brought down to the back parlor and filled up and then I can drownd myself in real water."

A pack of wolves could not have fallen more noisily on a wounded brother than the children fell on this.

Tommy alone was dubious. He was afraid that the bath-tub was too securely fastened to the bath-room to be uprooted. But he promised to ask his mother. Sheila, the resourceful, had an alternative ready:

"Well, anyway, she could have a wash-boiler brought in from the kitchen, couldn't she?"

Tommy thought mebbe she could, but would she?

Mrs. Vickery did not interfere. She had an idea that Mrs. Jerrems could be trusted to see to it that Ophelia had an extra-dry drowning. Mrs. Jerrems was rather fond of her furniture.

Money to buy gold paper for the crowns, and silver paper to make canes look like swords and curtain-poles like spears, nearly wrecked the project. But Tommy thought that by patience and assiduity he could shake out of the patent savings-bank his father had given him enough dimes to subsidize the institution, on condition that he might reimburse himself out of the first moneys that were bound to flood the box-office.

There was earnest debate over the price of admission. Clyde Burbage suggested five pins, but Sheila turned up her nose at this; it sounded amateurish. She said that her father and mother would never play in any but two-dollar theaters—or "fe-aters," as she still called them. Still, she supposed that since the comp'ny was all juveniles they'd better not charge more than a dollar for seats, and fifty cents for the nigger-heaven.

Tommy Jerrems, who had some bitter acquaintance with the ductile qualities of that community, emitted a long, low "Whew!" He said that they would be lucky to get five cents a head in that town, and not many heads at that. This sum was reluctantly accepted by Sheila, and the syndicate moved to adjourn.

Sheila put her hand in Mrs. Vickery's and ducked one knee respectfully. But Mrs. Vickery, with an impulse of curious subservience, knelt down and embraced the child and kissed her.

She had an odd feeling that some day she would say, "Sheila Kemble? Oh yes, I knew her when she was a tiny child. I always said she would startle the world."

She seemed even now to hear her own voice echoing faintly back from the future.

The guests made a quiet exit at the door, but they stampeded down the steps like a scamper of sheep. Sheila's piercing cry came back. It was wildly poignant, though it expressed only her excitement in a game of tag.

CHAPTER II

THE house seemed still to quiver after the neighbors' young had left. Mrs. Vickery moved about restoring order. And Dorothy bustled after her, full of talk and snickers. But Eugene curled up in a chair by a window as solemn as Sophokles.

Mrs. Vickery was still thinking of Sheila. She asked first of her, "How did you come to meet this little Kemble girl?"

Dorothy explained: "Oh, I telephoned Clyde Burbage to come over and play, and he said he couldn't, 'cause they had comp'ny; and I said, 'Bring comp'ny along,' and he did, and she's his cousin; her grandma lives at his house, and her papa and mamma are going to visit there at Clyde's for a week. Isn't Sheila a case, mamma? She says the funniest things. I wish I could 'member some of 'em."

Mrs. Vickery smiled and stared at Dorothy. In the grand lottery of children she had drawn Dorothy. She saw in the child many of her own traits, many of the father's traits. She loved Dorothy, of course, and had much good reason for her instinctive devotion, and many rewards for it. And yet the child was singularly talentless, as her father was, as Mrs. Vickery confessed herself to be.

She wondered at the strange distribution of human gifts —some dowered from their cradles with the workaday virtues and commonplace vices, and some mysteriously flecked with a kind of wildness that is both less and more than virtue, an oddity that gives every speech or gesture an unusual emphasis, a rememberable differentness.

Dorothy was a safe child to have; she would make a reliable, admirable, good woman. But Mrs. Vickery felt that if Sheila had been her child she would have been incessantly afraid of the girl and for her, incessantly uncertain of the future. Yet, she would have watched her, and the neighbors would have watched her, with a breathless fascination as one watches a tight-rope walker who moves on a hazardous path, yet moves above the heads of the crowd and engages all its eyes.

Little Eugene Vickery had a quirk of the unusual, but it was not conspicuous; he was a burrower, who emerged like a mole in unexpected places, and led a silent, inconspicuous life gnawing at the roots of things.

His mother found him now, as so often, taciturn, brooding, thinking long thoughts—the solemnest thing there is, a solemn child.

"Why are you so silent, Eugene?" she said.

He smiled sedately and shook his head with evasion. But Dorothy pointed the finger of scorn at him; she even whittled one finger with another and taunted him, shrilly:

"'Gene's in love with Sheila! 'Gene's in love with Sheila!"

"Am not!" he growled with a puppy's growl.

"Are so!" cried Dorothy, jubilantly.

"Well, s'posin' I am?" he answered, sullenly. "She's a durned sight smarter and prettier than—some folks."

This sobered Dorothy and crumpled her chin with distress. Like her mother, she had long ago recognized with helpless regret that she was not brilliant.

Mrs. Vickery, amazed at hearing the somber Eugene accused of so frivolous a thing as a love-affair, stared at him and murmured, "Why, 'Gene!"

Feeling a storm sultry in the air, she warned Dorothy that it was time to practise her piano-lesson. Dorothy, whose other name was Dutiful, made no protest, but began to trudge up and down the scales with a perfect

accuracy that was somehow perfectly musicless and almost unendurable.

Mrs. Vickery knew that Eugene would speak when he was ready, and not before. She pretended to ignore him, but her heart was beating high with the thrill of that new era in a mother's soul when she sees the first of her children smitten with the love-dart and becomes a sort of painfully amused Niobe, wondering always where the next arrow will come from and which it will hit next.

After a long while Eugene spoke, though not at all as she expected him to speak. But then he never spoke as she expected him to speak. He murmured:

"Mamma?"

"Yes, honey."

"Do you s'pose I could write a play as good as that old Shakespeare did?"

"Why—why, yes, I'm sure you could—if you tried."

Mrs. Vickery had always understood the rarely comprehended truth that praise creates less conceit than the withholding of it, as food builds strength and slays the hunger that cries for it.

Eugene was evidently encouraged, but he kept silence so long that finally she gave him up. She was leaving the room when he murmured again:

"Mamma."

"Yes, honey."

"I guess I'll write a play."

"Fine!" she said.

"For Sheila."

"Oh!"

Mrs. Vickery cast up her eyes and stole out, not knowing what to say. Already the child was turning his affections away from home and her.

An hour later she almost stepped on him again. He was lying on the rug by the twilight-glimmering window of the dining-room, whither Dorothy's relentless scales had driven him. He was lying on his stomach with his

nose almost touching his composition-book, and he was scrawling large words laboriously with a nub of pencil so stubby that he seemed to be writing with his own forefinger bent like a grasshopper's leg.

William Shakespeare, Gent., sleeping in Avon church, had no knowledge of what conspiracy was hatching against his long-enough prestige. And if he had known, that very human mind of his might have suspected the truth, that the inspiration of his new rival was less a desire to crowd an old gentleman from the top shelf of fame than to supplant him in the esteem of a certain very young woman.

Shakespeare himself in that same kidnapped play of his called "Hamlet" complained of the children's theater that rivaled his own.

There was complaint now of the new children's theater in the minor city of Braywood. Three homes were topsy-turvied by the insatiable, irrepressible mummers.

CHAPTER III

IT was less than an hour after Sheila had left Mrs. Vickery's when Mrs. Jerrems was on the telephone, plaintively demanding, "Who on earth is this Kemble child?"

Mrs. Vickery told her what she knew, and Mrs. Jerrems sighed: "A stage-child! That explains everything. She's got Tommy simply bewitched."

Besides the requisition for costumes and accessories that turned every attic trunk inside out there was an uneasy social complication.

Mrs. Jerrems and Mrs. Burbage knew each other only slightly and liked each other something less than that. Yet Tommy and Sheila had arranged that Mrs. Burbage and her husband and her mother and the strangers within their gates should all descend upon Mrs. Jerrems and pay five cents apiece for the privilege of entering her drawing-room.

Only one thing could have been more intolerable than obeying the children's embarrassing demand, and that would have been breaking the children's hearts by refusing it. So Sheila's mother and father, her grandmother and her aunt, were all browbeaten into accepting the invitations that Mrs. Jerrems had been browbeaten into extending.

Sheila assumed that Mrs. Jerrems was as much interested in Mr. Shakespeare's success as she was. And she rather took control of the house, saying a great many "Pleases," but uprooting the furniture from the places it had occupied till they had become almost sacred. She

had half of the drawing-room cleared of chairs and the other half packed with rows of them. She commandeered two of Mrs. Jerrems's guest-room sheets (the ones with the deep hemstitching and the swollen initials). These she pinned upon a rope stretched from two nails driven into the walls, with conspicuous damage to the plaster, since the first places chosen did not hold the nails—and came out with them. The rope was the clothes-line, which was needed in the yard, but which Tommy had calmly cut down at Sheila's requisition. He had cut his own finger incidentally and it bled copiously on the dining-room drugget. He had later nailed the bandage to the wall and gone overboard with the stepladder, carrying with him what he could clutch from the mantelpiece *en passant.*

This was not the only damage; *item,* a wonderful imitation cut-glass celery-jar used during rehearsals to represent the chalice of poison; *item,* several gouges in furniture, which Mrs. Jerrems would almost rather have had in her own flesh than in her mahogany.

But eventually the evening came and the guests went shyly into the rows of chairs that made Mrs. Jerrems's drawing-room look like a funeral. Mrs. Jerrems was worried, too, by the thought of entertaining not only the child of stage people, but an actor and an actress too famous to be disguised.

She wondered what her preacher would say of it.

And she could not feel easy about the spectacle of her son standing in her hallway and collecting money from callers before they were admitted.

The performance was a torment. The strutting children were so pompous that it was impossible to watch them without laughter, yet laughter would have been heinously cruel. The usual relations were reversed: the children comported themselves with vast reverence for a great work of art, and the naughty parents sat smothering their snickers.

The voice of the prompter was loud in the wings (the dining-room and hall), and the action was suspended occasionally while the actors quarreled with the prompter as to whose turn it was to speak. The Sheila-ized Shakespeare had not been written down, and, though the play was greatly compressed, the company forgot a good deal of what was left. In her innocence, the editress had also neglected to omit certain phrases that polite grown-ups suppress. These came forth with appalling effect.

Laertes was so enraptured with counting and recounting the box-office receipts that he had to be sent for on two occasions. Clyde and Eugene came to blows on a dispute extraneous to the plot, and Dorothy, as the mother, giggled all through the closet scene and continued to whinny long after she had quaffed the fatal cup. Her last words were: "Oh Ha-ha-hamlet, the drink, the d-d-drink! I am poi-hoi-hoi-hoisoned." This, combined with the litter of corpses, set the audience into a roar of laughter.

Then Sheila entered as the late-returning Ophelia and sobered them somehow on the instant.

Sheila won an indisputable triumph. The others were at best children, and peculiarly childish in the rôles that have swamped all but the largest hulls. But Sheila, for all her shortcomings and far-goings, had an uncanny power. Even when she doubled as the Ghost and tripped over the sheet in which she squeaked and gibbered nobody laughed. Her girlish treble, trying to be orotund, had moments of gruesome influence. Her Ophelia was pathetically winsome in the earlier scenes, and in the mania she struck notes that put sudden ice into the blood. There was no denying her a dreadful intuition of things she could not know, and a gift for interpreting what she had never felt.

The other parents were ashamed of the contrast. As Mrs. Jerrems whispered to Mrs. Vickery, "One thing is

certain, your Dorothy and my boy Tom will never know how to act."

"But," Mrs. Vickery whispered back, "that doesn't prove that they won't go on the stage."

After the final curtain and innumerable curtain calls the play was ended and the audience filed back of the sheet to lavish its homage on the troupe.

Mrs. Jerrems had resolved to make the best of it, once she was in for it; and tried to take the curse off the profaantion of collecting money from her guests by entertaining them and the actors at a little supper. Her son Tommy, always the financier, felt a greater profanation in the idea of charging five cents admission and then throwing in a supper that cost fifty cents a head. But Mrs. Jerrems told Tommy to take care of his end of the enterprise and she would take care of hers. And she reminded him that the supper would cost him nothing. He consoled himself with the reflection that "Women got no head for business."

The juvenile tragedians ate at a small side-table, and so completely relaxed the solemnity they had revealed on the boards that the elder laity chiefly listened and smiled among themselves.

Mrs. Jerrems studied Roger Kemble and his wife, "Miss" Farren, surreptitiously, as one would study a Thibetan or a Martian. Knowing in advance that they were actors, she felt sure that she found in them odd and characteristic mannerisms, for it is easy to find proofs when we have the facts. And once a man is known to be an actor it is easy to see the marks of the grease-paint, though, not knowing it, one is as likely to think him a preacher or a prize-fighter or whatever else he may suggest. The talk of Mr. Kemble and Miss Farren was normal; their manners polished, as became a class with so much leisure and culture. But Mrs. Jerrems felt that she could see the glamour of the footlights in everything they said or did.

She had seen them both in some of their plays. On her excursions to New York, a visit to their theater was hardly less important, and much more likely to be accomplished, than a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When "Farren and Kemble," as they were apt to be called, left New York for a tour they rarely visited Braywood, or if they did the prices at the opera-house were sure to be advanced and all Braywood put on its best clothes.

For one thing, Polly Farren and Roger Kemble were pre-eminently fashionable. Their plays dealt with the fashionable people of Europe and America. They were generally English, and Roger Kemble was likely to be Lord Somebody, and Polly Farren at least an Honorable Miss This-or-That. Or, if they appeared in an American manuscript, they usually owned country houses and yachts and had titles for guests. Their clothes were sure to be a sort of prospectus of the next season's modes. Roger Kemble was never a fop, and always kept on the safe side of ostentation, yet he was always scrupulously a pace ahead of the style and groomed to flawlessness. He represented Piccadilly patterns and his clock was about five hours ahead of New York time. Polly was a little braver. She was beautiful, lithe, and dashing, and she was not afraid of anything that French taste and caprice might prophesy.

Everybody knew, too, that Polly Farren and Roger Kemble "went with" the smartest people. Those who knew they were married knew that their summer cottage was among the handsomest in the Long Island groups. Their manners were smart, too, with just the right flippancy and just the right restraint. It was a school of etiquette to see them enter a drawing-room or sip tea importantly, or tear a passion to embroidery.

Polly had made her first sensation in a play in which she was supposed to have imbibed more champagne than her pretty head could carry. The critics raved over her demonstration of the fine art of being tipsy in a ladylike

manner. Roger Kemble's rôles frequently compelled him to be "as drunk as a lord," and young men of bibulosity tried to remember him in their cups.

So now Mrs. Jerrems, watching the husband and wife at the homely task of stowing away a small-city supper, seemed to be watching a scene on the stage. She dreaded them, yet she tried to copy them. Faithful church-member that she was, she abhorred the stage theoretically, and practically followed its influence more than the church's. She kept taking notes on Polly Farren's costume and carriage, and her husband would later be admonished that many, many things he did were pitiably below the standard of Roger Kemble.

The Kembles were not unaware of the inspection they underwent. They were used enough to it, yet it irked them in this small community whither they had retired during the Holy Week closing of their company. They were glad to be gone as soon as they could decently take their leave and carry off their wonder-child.

Sheila was so exhausted by her labors as editress, directress, and actress that she had yawned even in the midst of her prettiest thank-yous for the praise she battened on. On the way she clung to her father's hand in a sleep-walking drowse, and lurched into him until he caught her into his bosom and carried her home and up the stairs to her bed. She slept while her mother undressed her, and there was no waking her to her prayers. Even in her heavy slumbers she fell into an attitude of such grace that it seemed almost conscious.

Roger and Polly looked at her and smiled; and shook their heads over her.

"She is hopelessly ours," said Kemble. "I'm afraid there'll be no keeping her off the stage when she grows up."

Kemble was in his bath-robe in the bath-room before

his wife, who had not moved from her posture of contemplation, suddenly thought aloud:

"After all, why not?"

Kemble paused with the tooth-paste tube above his tooth-brush to query, "Why not what?"

"What better chance is there for a woman?"

Kemble moved close enough to her to nudge her out of her muse and demand again, "What woman are you talking about?"

"That one," said Polly. "That little understudy of life. You say we sha'n't be able to keep her off the stage. Why should we try to?"

"Well, knowing what we do of the stage, my dear,—it isn't exactly the ideal place for a girl, now is it?"

"No, of course not. But where is the ideal place for a girl? Is there such a thing? We know all too well how much suffering and anxiety and disappointment and wickedness there is on the stage; but where will you go to escape it? Look at the society wives and daughters we know, in town and out in the country. Look at the poor girls in the shops and factories."

"That's so," Kemble spluttered across his shuttling tooth-brush. "I rather fancy a smaller city is better."

His wife laughed softly: "You ought to have heard what I've been hearing about this town! You'd think it was the home of all villainy. There's enough scandal and tragedy here to fill a hundred volumes. There are problem-plays here—among busy church-members, too—that make Ibsen read like a copy of *St. Nicholas*."

She put out the light in Sheila's room and went into her own, lighted herself a cigarette from the cigar her husband had left in her hair-pin tray, and sat down before the cold radiator as before a fireplace to talk about life. People were all rôles to her and their histories were scenarios that interested her more or less as she saw herself playing them.

"When I look around at my old school friends and rel-

atives off the stage," she said, "I can't see that they've found any recipe for happiness. Clara Gaines is a domestic soul and her husband is a druggist, but he leaves her to be domestic all by herself, and she tells me he never spends a minute at home that he can spend outside. Ella Westover has divorced two husbands in Terre Haute already. Marjorie Cranford tells me that her home town out in—in the Middle West somewhere—has a fast set that makes the Tenderloin look stupid. Clarice —What's her name now?—well, she has married an awfully good man, but she has to wheedle every cent she gets out of him or cheat him out of it, and she says she wants to scream at his hypocrisy. She thinks she'll run off and leave him any day now."

Kemble drew a chair to her side and put his feet on the radiator alongside hers. He found his cigar out, and relighted it with difficulty from her cigarette as he laughed:

"Polly is a bit of a pessimist to-night, eh? Is it the quietness of this little burg? I was rather enjoying the peace and repose and all that sort of thing."

"So was I. But that's because it's a change for us to have an evening off. Think of the women who never have anything else. They're not happy, Roger. You can't find one of them that will say she is."

"You don't fancy small-town respectability for your daughter, then?"

"I hope she'll be respectable. But there's so little real respectability in being just dull and bored to death, in just sitting round and waiting for some man to come home, in having nothing to spend except what you can steal out of his trousers or squeeze out of an allowance. I'd rather have Sheila an actress than a toadstool or a parasite on some man. She has one of those wild-bird natures that I had. The safest thing for her is the freedom and a lot of work and admiration, and a chance to act. The stage is no paradise, the Lord knows, but the first woman

that ever knew freedom was the actress. These votes-for-women rebels are all clamoring now for what we actresses have always had. Would it break your heart, Roger, if our little Sheila went on the stage?"

Kemble followed a slow cloud of smoke with the soft words:

"My mother was an actress."

He drew in more smoke and let it curl forth luxuriously as he murmured, "And my wife is an actress."

It would have surprised the Farren-Kemble following to see those flippant comedians so domesticated and holding a solemn *ante-vitam* inquest over the future of their child. But a father is a father and a mother a mother the world over.

Polly put out her hand and squeezed Roger's, and he lifted hers and touched it to his lips with an old comedy grace. She drew the two hands back across the little gulf between them and returned the compliment, then rested her cheek on their conjoined fingers and pondered:

"We could save Sheila the hardest part of it. She wouldn't have to hang round the agencies or bribe any brute with herself, or barnstorm with any cheap company. And she wouldn't have to go on the stage by way of any scandal."

Roger growled comfortably: "That's so. She could step right into the old-established firm of Farren & Kemble. The main thing for us to see is that she is a good actress—as her mother was and her two grandmothers and three of her four great-grandmothers, and so on back."

Polly amended: "She mustn't go on the stage too soon, though—or too late; and she must have a good education—French and German, and travel abroad and all that."

"Then that's settled," Kemble laughed. "And as soon as we've got her all prepared and established and

on the way to big success, she'll fall in love with some blamed cub who'll drag her to his home in Skaneateles."

"Probably; but she'll come back."

"All right. And now, having written Sheila's life for her to rewrite, let's go to bed. There'll be no sleeping in this noisy house in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

THAT was a tremendous week for the children of Braywood. As some quiet bayou harbors for a time a few birds of passage restlessly resting before they fly on into the sky, so the domestic poultry of Braywood was stirred by the Kemble wild fowl.

Four generations were gathered at the Burbage home. Sheila's great-grandmother was always there at the home of Clyde Burbage, senior, who had fallen out of the line of strollers, and become a merchant. His wife's mother, who was Polly Farren's mother, too, was there for a visit. The old lady and the older lady had left the stage and now spent their hours in regretting the decadence of earlier glories, as their elders had done before them, and as their children would do in their turn.

The Kembles and Farrens and Burbages were all peers in the aristocracy of the theater, which, like every other world, has its princes and peasants, its merchants and vagabonds, saints and sinners.

None of this line dated back, however, to the time when Holy Week was a period of industry for the churchly actors who prepared their miracles and moralities for the edification of the people. Nowadays Holy Week is a time when most of the theaters close, and the others entertain diminished audiences and troupes whose enthusiasm is diminished by the halving of their salaries.

It is a period when so many people desire to be seen in church or fear to be seen in the playhouse, that the receipts drop off amazingly, though the same people feel

it no sin to crowd the same theater the week before or the week after the Passion sennight.

Sometimes a play is strong enough in draught to pack the theater in spite of the anniversary. This year the Farren-Kemble play was not quite successful enough to justify the risk of half-filled auditoriums. So they "rested."

But to the children, as to the other animals, there are no holy days, or rather no unholy days. The children of Braywood made a theatrical week of it, and Sheila reveled in her opportunity. She had an audience everywhere she went.

The other children stood about her and wondered. She fascinated them, and they were eager to do as she bade, though they felt a certain uneasiness; as if they had wished for a fairy queen to play with and had got their wish.

The other children commanded in their own specialties and in their turns. At outdoor romps and sports Clyde Burbage led the way, and endangered future limbs or present lives by his fearless banter. At household games with dolls and diseases Dorothy had a matronly authority and Sheila was like a novice. In hospital games, Dorothy, the head nurse, must show her how babies should be handled, punished, and medicined.

It should be set down to Sheila's credit that she was meek as Moses in the presence of domestic genius. But it must be added that the things she learned from Dorothy were likely to be exploited later in some drama where Sheila took full sway. In Dorothy's games the dolls always recovered when Dr. Eugene was called in with his grandmother's spectacles on. In Sheila's dramas the dolls almost always perished in agony, while the desperate mother clung to the embarrassed doctor, at the same time screaming to him to save the child and whispering him to pronounce it dead.

Roger Kemble happened to be passing Mrs. Vickery's

front yard during one of these tragedies, and paused to watch it across the fence while Mrs. Vickery attended from the porch. One of those startling unconscious scandals in which children's plays abound was suddenly developed, and Roger moved on rapidly while Mrs. Vickery vanished into the house.

All the while the young Shakespeare of Braywood wrought upon his play for Sheila. But the moment he thought he had it perfected, he would hear her toss off one of the dramatic principles that she had overheard her father and mother discussing after some rehearsal. Then Eugene would blush to realize that his drama had violated this dictum and was unworthy of the great actress. And he would steal away to unravel his fabric and knit it up again.

At last it began to shape itself according to her ideals as he had gleaned them. He sat up finishing it until he was sent to bed for the fourth time, then he worked in his room till his mother knocked on his door and ordered his light out and forbade him to leave his bed again.

He waited till he knew that his parents were asleep, then he cautiously renewed his light and, sitting up in bed, wrote with that grasshopper-legged finger of his till he could keep his eyes ajar no longer. Then he held one eye open with his left hand till the hand itself went to sleep. He never knew it when his head rolled over to the pillow. He knew nothing more till he woke, shivering, to find the daylight in the room and the light still burning expensively.

He put out the light and worked till breakfast and his play were ready. After he had spooned up his porridge and chewed down his second glass of milk he made haste toward Clyde Burbage's house. He hesitated at the nearest corner till he found courage to proceed. He mounted the steps with his precious manuscript buttoned against his swinging heart. He rang the bell. Mrs.

Burbage came to the door, and he peeled his cap from his burning head:

"Is—is Clyde at home, Mis' Burbage?"

Mrs. Burbage was surprised at the formality of the visit. Boys usually stood outside and whistled for Clyde or called "Hoo-oo!" or "Hay, Clyde—oh, Cly-ud!" till he answered. In fact, he had only recently answered just such a signal from another boy and slammed the door after him.

When Eugene learned that Clyde was abroad he made as if to depart, then paused and, with a violent carelessness, mumbled, "I don't suppose Sheila is home, either?"

"Sheila? Oh no! She and her father and mother left on the midnight train."

"Is that so?" said Eugene as casually as if he had just learned that all his relatives were dead or that he had overslept Christmas.

He tried to make a brave exit, but he was so forlorn that Mrs. Burbage forgot to smile as grown-ups smile at the big tragedies of the little folk. She watched him struggling overlong at the gate-latch. She saw him break into a frantic run for home as soon as he had gained the sidewalk. Then she went inside, shaking her head and thinking the same words that were clamoring in the boy's sick heart:

"Oh, Sheila! Sheila!"

CHAPTER V

THE big young man with the shoulders of a bureau would never have been taken for a student if he had not been crossing the campus with a too small cap precariously perched on his too much hair, and if he had not been swinging a strapful of those thin, weary-worn volumes that look to be text-books and not novels. The eye-glasses set on his young nose mainly accented his youth. If he had not depended on them he would have made a splendid center rush. Instead, he was driven to the 'varsity crew, where he won more glory than in the class-room. He paused before a ground-floor window of the oldest of the old dormitories. That window-seat as usual displayed the slim and gangling form of a young man who was usually to be found there stretched out on his stomach and reading or writing with solemn absorption. It was necessary to call him repeatedly before he came back from the mist he surrounded himself with:

"Hay! 'Gene! Oh, Vick! 'Gene Vickery! Hay you!"

"Hay yourself! Oh, hey-o, Bret Winfield, h'are you?"

"Rotten! Say—you going to the theater to-night?"

"I usually do. What's the play?"

"'A Friend in Need.' Ran six months in New York."

"All right, I'll go."

"Better get a seat under cover of the balcony."

"Why?"

"Looks like a big night to-night. The Freshmen are going to bust up the show."

"Really? Why?"

Vickery was only a post-graduate, in his first year at

Leroy University. He had gone through the home-town schools and a preparatory school and a smaller college, before he had moved on to Leroy to earn a Ph.D. He had long ago given up his ambitions to replace Shakespeare. So now he asked in his ignorance why the Freshmen of Leroy must break up the play. And Winfield answered from his knowledge:

"Because about this time of year the Freshman class always busts up a show. It's one of the sacredest traditions of our dear old Alum Mater. Last year's Freshies put a big musical comedy on the blink. Kidnapped half the chorus girls. This year there's no burlesque in view, so the cubs are reduced to pulling down a high comedy."

"Won't the faculty do anything about it?"

"Faculty won't know anything about it till the morning papers tell how many policemen were lost and how much damage was done to the theater. If you're going, either take an umbrella or sit under the balcony, for there will be doings."

"I'll be there, Bret."

"I wish I could have you with me, but a gang of us Seniors have taken a front box together. S'long!"

"S'long!"

Vickery went back to his text-book. He was to be a professor of Greek. He had almost forgotten that he had ever fallen in love with an actress. He had kept no track of stage history.

His acquaintance with Bret Winfield had been casual until his sister Dorothy came on to spend a few days near her brother. Dorothy had grown up to be the sort of woman her childhood prophesied—big, beautiful, placid, very noble at her best and stupid at her worst. Her big eyes were the Homeric "ox-eyes," and Eugene in the first flush of his first Greek had called her thence Bo-opis, which he shortened later to "Bo."

The bo-optic Dorothy made a profound impression on

Bret Winfield, and he cultivated Eugene thereafter on her account. He had a rival in the scientific school, Jim Greeley, a fellow-townsman of Winfield's. Greeley's matter-of-fact soul was completely congenial to Dorothy, but the two young men hated each other with great dignity, and Dorothy reveled in their rivalry. She was quite forgotten, however, when matters of real college moment were under way—such as the Freshman assault on the drama.

The news of the riot-to-be percolated through the two thousand students without a word reaching the ears of the faculty or the officers of the theater. There was no reason to expect trouble on this occasion. There had been no football or baseball or other contest to excite the students. They made a boisterous audience before the curtain rose—but then they always did. They called to each other from crag to crag. They whistled and stamped in unison when the curtain was a moment late; but that was to be expected in college towns. Strangely, students have been always and everywhere rioters.

The first warning the audience had of unusual purposes came when a round of uproarious applause greeted a comedian's delivery of a bit of very cheap wit which had been left in because the author declined to waste time polishing the seat-banging part of his first act. In this country an audience that is extremely displeased does not hiss or boo; it applauds sarcastically and persistently. The poor actor who had aimed to hurry past the line found himself held up by the ironic hand-clapping. When he tried to go on, it broke out anew.

An actor cannot disclaim or apologize for the lines he has to speak, however his own prosperities are involved in them. So poor Mr. Tuell had now to stand and perspire while the line he had begged the author to delete provoked the tempest.

Whenever the fuming comedian opened his mouth to speak the applause drowned him. It soon fell into a

rhythm of one-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three. Tuell could only wait till the claque had grown weary of its own reproof. Then he went on to his next feeble witticism, another play upon words so childish that it brought forth cries of, "Naughty, naughty!"

The other members of the company gathered in the wings, as uncomfortable as a band of early martyrs waiting their turns to appear before the lions. To most of them this was their first encounter with a mutinous audience.

Audiences are usually a chaos of warring tastes and motives which must somehow be given focus and unity by the actors. That was the hardest part of the day's work—to get the house together. To-night they must face a ready-made audience with a mind of its own—and that hostile.

The actors watched the famous "first old woman," Mrs. John Vining, sail out with the bravery of a captive empress marching down a Roman street in chains. She was greeted with harsh cries of, "Grandma!" and, "Oh, boys, Granny's came!"

Mrs. Vining smiled indulgently and went on with her lines. The applause broke out and continued while she and Mr. Tuell conducted a dumb-show. Then an abrupt silence fell just in time to emphasize the banality of her next speech.

"You ask of Claribel? Speaking of angels, here she comes now."

At the sound of her name the actress summoned clutched the cross-piece of the flat that hid her from the audience. She longed for courage to run away. But actors do not run away, and she made ready to dance out on the stage and gush her brilliant first line: "Oh, auntie, there you are. I've been looking for you everywhere."

Sheila had always hated the entrance because of its bustling unimportance. It was exciting enough to-night. No sooner had Mrs. Vining announced her name than there was a salvo of joy from the mob.

"Oh, girls, here comes Claribel!"

Some one stood up and yelped, "Three hearty cheers and a tigress for Claribel."

Sheila fell back into the wings as the clamor smote her. But she had been seen and admired. There was a hurricane of protest against her retreat:

"Come on in, Claribel; the water's fine!" "Don't leave the old farm, Claribel; we need you!" "Peekaboo! I see You Hiding behind the chair."

Each of the mutineers shrieked something that he thought was funny, and laughed at it without heeding what else was shouted. The result was deafening.

Eugene Vickery's heart was set aswing at the glimpse of Sheila Kemble. The sight of her name on the program had revived his boyhood memories of her. He rose to protest against the hazing of a young girl, especially one whose tradition was so sweet in his remembrance, but he was in the back of the house and his cry of "Shame!" was lost in the uproar, merely adding to it instead of quelling it.

Bret Winfield in a stage box had seen Sheila in the wings for some minutes before her entrance. He knew nothing of her except that her beauty pleased him thoroughly and that he was sorry to see how scared she was when she retreated.

He saw also how plucky she was, for, angered by the boorish unchivalry of the mob, she marched forth again like a young Amazon. At the full sight of her the Freshmen united in a huge noise of kisses and murmurs of, "Yum-yum!" and cries of, "Me for Claribel!" "Say, that's some gal!" "Name and address, please!" "I saw her first!" "Second havers!" "Mamma, buy me that!" She was called a peach, a peacherino, a pippin, a tangerine, a swell skirt—anything that occurred to the uninspired.

Sheila felt as if she were struck by a billow. Her own color swept past the bounds of the stationary blushes she

had painted on her cheeks. She came out again and began her line: "Oh, auntie—"

It was as if echo had gone into hysterics. Two hundred voices mocked her: "Oh, auntie!" "Oh, auntie!" "Oh, auntie!"

She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry, she wanted to run, she wanted to fight. She wished that the whole throng had but one ear, that she might box it.

The stage-manager was shrieking from the wings: "Go on! Don't stop for anything!"

She continued her words with an effect of pantomime. The responses were made against a surf of noise.

Then Eric Folwell, who played the hero, came on. He was handsome, and knew it. He was a trifle overgraceful, and his evening coat fitted his perfect figure almost too perfectly. He was met with pitiless implications of effeminacy. "Oh, Clarice!" "Say, Lizzie, are you busy?" "Won't somebody slap the brute on the wrist?" "My Gawd! ain't he primeval?" "Oh, you cave-girl!"

As if this were not shattering enough, some of the students had provided themselves with bags of those little torpedoes that children throw on the Fourth of July. One of these exploded at Folwell's feet. At the utterly unexpected noise he jumped, as a far braver man might have done, taken thus unawares.

This simply enraptured the young mob, and showers of torpedoes fell about the stage. It fairly snowed explosives. The gravel scattered in all directions. A pebble struck Sheila on the cheek. It smarted only a trifle, but the pain was as nothing to the sacrilege.

Somehow the play struggled on to the cue for the entrance of the heroine of the play. Miss Zelma Griffen was the leading woman. She was supposed to arrive in a taxicab, and the warning "honk" of it delighted the audience. She was followed on by a red-headed chauffeur who asked for his fare, which she borrowed from the

hero, then passed to the chauffeur, who thanked her and made his exit.

Miss Griffen was a somewhat sophisticated actress with a large record in college boys. While she waited for her cue, she had cannily decided to appease the mob by adopting a tone of good-fellowship. She had also provided herself with a rosette of the college colors. She waved it at the audience and smiled.

This was a false note. It was resented as a familiarity and a presumption. This same college had rotten-egged an actor some years before for wearing a 'varsity sweater on the stage. It greeted Miss Griffen with a storm of angry protest, together with a volley of torpedoes.

Miss Griffen, completely nonplussed, gaped for her line, could not remember a word of it, then ran off the stage, leaving Sheila and Mrs. Vining and Tuell to take up the fallen torch and improvise the scene. Sheila made the effort, asked herself the questions Miss Griffen should have asked her, and answered them. It was her religion as an actress never to let the play stop.

With all her wits askew, she soon had herself snarled up in a tangle of syntax in which she floundered hopelessly. The student body railed at her:

"Oh, you grammar! 'Rah, 'rah, 'rah, night school!"

This insult was too much for the girl. She lost every trace of self-control.

All this time Bret Winfield had grown angrier and angrier. Bear-baiting was one thing; but dove-baiting was too cowardly even for mob-action, too unfair even for a night of sports, unpardonable even in Freshmen. He was thrilled with a chivalrous impulse to rush to the defense of Sheila, whose angry beauty had inflamed him further.

He stood up in the proscenium box and tried to call for fair play. He was unheard and unseen; all eyes were fastened on the stage where the fluttering actress besought the howling stage-manager to throw her the line louder.

Winfield determined to make himself both seen and heard. Fellow Seniors in the box caught at his coat-tails, but he wrenched loose and, putting a foot over the rail, stepped to the apron of the stage. In his struggle he lost his eye-glasses. They fell into the footlight trough, and he was nearly blind.

Sheila, who stood close at hand, recoiled in panic at the sight of this unheard-of intrusion. The rampart of the footlights had always stood as a barrier between Sheila and the audience, an impassable parapet. To-night she saw it overpassed, and she watched the invader with much the same horror that a nun would experience at seeing a soldier enter a convent window.

Winfield advanced with hesitant valor and frowned fiercely at the dazzling glare that beat upward from the footlights.

He was recognized at once as the famous stroke-oar of the crew that had defeated the historic rivals of Grantham University. He was hailed with tempest.

Sheila knew neither his fame nor his mission. She felt that he was about to lay hands on her; all things were possible from such barbarians. Her knees weakened. She turned to retreat and clung to a table for support.

Suddenly she had a defender. From the wings the big actor who had played the taxicab-driver dashed forward with a roar of anger and let drive at Winfield's face. Winfield heard the onset, turned and saw the fist coming. There was no time to explain his chivalric motive. He ducked and the blow grazed his cheek, but the actor's impetus caught him off his balance and hustled him on backward till one foot slid down among the footlights. Three electric bulbs were smashed as he went overboard into the orchestra.

He almost broke the backs of two unprepared viola-players, but they eased his fall. He caromed off their shoulder-blades into the multifarious instruments of the "man in the tin-shop." One foot thumped bass-drum

with a mighty plop; the other sent a cymbal clanging. His clutching hands set up a riot of "effects," and he lay on the floor in a ruin of orchestral noises, and a bedlam of din from the audience.

By the time he had gathered himself together the curtain had been lowered and the whole house was in a typhoon.

A dozen policemen who had been hastily summoned and impatiently awaited by the manager charged down the aisles and seized each a double arm-load of the nearest rioters. The foremost policeman received Winfield as he clambered, shamefaced, over the orchestra rail.

Winfield started to explain: "I went up there to ask the fellows to be quiet."

The officer, indignant as he was, let out a guffaw of contemptuous laughter: "Lord love you, kid, if that's the best lie you can tell, what's the uset of education?"

Winfield realized the hopelessness of such self-defense. It was less shameful to confess the misdemeanor than to be ridiculed for so impotent a pretext. He suffered himself to be jostled up the aisle and tossed into the patrol-wagon with the first van-load of prisoners. He counted on a brief stay there, for it was a custom of the college to tip over the patrol-wagon and rescue the victims of the police.

This year's Freshmen, however, lacked the necessary initiative and leadership, and before the lost opportunity could be regained the wagon had rolled away, leaving the class to eternal ignominy.

CHAPTER VI

DEPRIVED of its ringleaders, the mob fell into such disarray that it was ready to be cowed by the manager of the theater. He had waited for the police to remove the chief pirates, and now he addressed the audience with the one speech that could have had success:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've lowered the curtain and I'm going to keep it lowered till the hoodlums settle down or get thrown out. The majority of people here to-night have paid good money to see this show. It is a good show and played by a company of ladies and gentlemen from one of the best theaters in New York, and I propose to have them treated as such while they are in our city. We are going to begin the play all over again, but if there is any further disturbance I'll ring down the asbestos and put out the house lights. And no money will be returned at the box-office."

This last argument converted the mob into a sheriff's posse. The house-manager received a round of applause and the first Freshman who rose in his place was subdued by his own fellow-classmen.

Bret Winfield spent the night in a cell. He slept little, because the Freshmen hardly ceased to sing the night long; they were solacing themselves with doleful glees. Winfield could not help smiling at his imprisonment. Don Quixote was tasting the reward of misapplied chivalry.

The next morning he made no defense before the glowering judge who had played just such pranks in his college days and felt, therefore, a double duty to repress it in the later generation. He excoriated Bret Winfield especially,

and Winfield kept silence, knowing that the truth would gain him no credence and only added contempt. The judge fined the young miscreants five dollars each and left their further punishment to the faculty.

On his way back to his rooms after his release, Winfield met Eugene Vickery, and said, with a wry smile, "Hello, 'Gene! I've just escaped from the penitentiary."

To his astonishment, Vickery snapped back, "I'm sorry to hear it."

Winfield, seeing that he was in earnest, fumbled for words: "What the— Why the— Well, say!"

The slight and spindling youth confronted the bureau-chested giant and shook his finger in his face: "If you weren't so much bigger than I am I'd give you worse than that actor gave you. To think that a great big hulk like you should try to attack a little girl like that! Don't you ever dare speak to me or my sister again."

Winfield gave an excellent imitation of incipient apoplexy. He seized Vickery by the lapels to demand: "Good Lord, 'Gene, you don't think I— Say, what do you think I am, anyway? Why— Well, can you beat it? I ask you? Ah, you can all go plumb to— Ah, what's the good!".

Winfield never was an explainer. He lacked language; he lacked the ambition to be understood. It made him an excellent sportsman. When he lost he wasted no time in explaining why he had not won. To him the martyrdom of being misunderstood was less bitter than the martyrdom of justifying himself. He was so dazed now by the outcome of his knight-errantry that he resolved to leave the college to its own verdict of him. Eugene Vickery's ruling passion, however, was a frenzy to understand and to be understood. He caught the meaning in Winfield's incoherence and seized him by the lapel:

"You mean that you didn't go out on the stage to scare the girl, but to— Well, that's more like you!

I'm a lunkhead not to have known it from the first. Why, a copper collared me, too, and accused me of being one of the Freshmen! I talked him out of it and proved I was a post-graduate, or I'd have spent the night in a dungeon, too. Well, well! and to think I got you so wrong! You write a statement to the papers right away."

"Ah, what's the good?"

"Then I will."

"Just as much obliged, but no, you won't."

"You ought to square yourself with the people who—"

"There's just two people I want to square myself with—that little actress who didn't realize what I was there for, and that damned actor who knocked me through the bass-drum. Who were they, anyway? I didn't get a program."

"I didn't see the man's name; but the girl—I used to know her."

"You did! Say!"

"She was only a kid then, and so was I. She could act then, too,—for a kid, but now— You missed the rest of the show, though, didn't you?"

"Yes. I was called away."

"After you left, the audience was as good as a congregation. Sheila Kemble—that's the girl—was wonderful. She didn't have much to do, but, golly! how she did it! She had that thing they call 'authority,' you know. I wrote a play for her as a kid."

"You did! Say! Did she like it?"

"She never saw it. But I'm going to write her another. I planned to be a professor of Greek—but not now—ump-umm! I'm going to be a playwright. And I'm going to make a star out of Sheila Kemble, and hitch my wagon to her."

"Well, say, give me a ride in that wagon, will you? Do you suppose I could meet her? I've got to square myself with her."

Eugene looked a trifle pained at Bret's interest in

another girl than Dorothy, but he said: "I'm on my way to the theater now to find out where she's stopping and leave this note for her. I don't suppose she'll remember me; but she might."

"Do you mind if I tag after you? I might get a swipe at that actor, too."

"Oh, well, come along."

They marched to the theater, stepping high and hoping higher. The stage door-keeper brought them to ground with the information that the company had left on a midnight train after the performance. He had no idea where they had gone.

The two youths, ignorant of the simple means of following theatrical routes, went back to their dismal university with a bland trust that fate would somehow arrange a rencounter for them.

Winfield was soon called before the faculty. He had rehearsed a speech written for him by Eugene Vickery. He forgot most of it and ruined its eloquence by his mumbling delivery.

The faculty had dealt harshly with the Freshmen, several of whom it had sent home to the mercy of their fathers. But Winfield's explanation was accepted. In the first place, he was a Senior and not likely to have stooped to the atrocity of abetting a Freshman enterprise. In the second place, he would be needed in the next rowing-contest at New London. In the third place, his millionaire father was trembling on the verge of donating to the university a second liberal endowment.

Winfield and Vickery returned to their daily chores and put in camphor their various ambitions. Winfield endured the multitudinous jests of the university on his record-breaking backward dive across the footlights, but he made it his business to find out the name of the actor who brought him his ignominy. In time he learned it and enshrined "Floyd Eldon" and "Sheila Kemble" in prominent niches for future attention. Somehow his

loneliness for Dorothy seemed less poignant than before.

Eugene Vickery could have been seen at almost any hour, lying on his stomach and changing an improbable novel into an impossible play.

CHAPTER VII

IT was Sheila Kemble's destiny to pass like a magnet through a world largely composed of iron filings, though it was her destiny also to meet a number of silver churns on whom her powers exerted no drag whatever. Her father had been greatly troubled by her growth through the various strata of her personality. He had noted with pain that she had a company smile which was not the smile that illumined her face when she was simply happy. He had begun a course of education. He kept taking her down a peg or two, mimicking her, satirizing her. Her mother protested.

"Let the child alone. It will wear off. She has to go through it, but she'll molt and take on a new set of feathers in due time."

"She's got to," Kemble groaned. "I'd rather have her deformed than affected. If she's going to be conscious of something, let her be conscious of her faults."

Sheila had been schooled at school as well as at home. With both father and mother earning large sums, the family was prosperous enough to give its only child the most expensive forms of education—and did. In school she tormented and charmed her teachers; she was so endlessly eager for attention. It was true that she always tried to earn it and deserve it, but the effort irritated the instructors, whose ideal for a girl was that she should be as inconspicuous as possible. That was not Sheila's ideal. Not at all!

She had soon tired of her classes. She was by nature quick at study. She learned her lessons by a sort of

mental photography, as she learned her rôles later. The grind of her lessons irked her, not because she wanted to be out at play like other children, but because she wanted to be in at work. As ambitious young men chafe to run away from school and begin their destinies, so young women are beginning to fret for their own careers.

But Sheila's father and mother were eager for her to stay a baby. Polly Farren especially was not unwilling to postpone acknowledging herself the mother of a grown-up daughter.

"You must have your childhood," Roger had said.

"But I've had it," Sheila declared.

"Oh, you have, have you?" her father laughed. "Why, you little upstart kid, you're only a baby."

Sheila protested: "Juliet was only thirteen years old when she married Romeo, and Eleonora Duse was only fourteen when she played the part, and here I'm sixteen and I haven't started yet."

"Help! help!" cried Roger, with a sickish smile. "But you must prepare yourself for your career by first educating yourself as a lady."

This argument had convinced her. She consented to play one more season at Miss Neely's school. She came forth more zealous than ever to be an actress. Polly and Roger had wheedled her along as best they could, tried to interest her in literature, water-colors, needlework, golf, tennis, European travel. But her cry for "work" could not be silenced.

When the autumn drew on they had urged her to try one year more at school, pleaded that there was no opening for her in their company. She was too young, too inexperienced.

She murmured "Yes?" with an impudent uptilt of inflection.

She left the house, and came home that afternoon bringing a contract. She handed it to her father with another of those rising inflections, "No?"

He looked at the paper, gulped, called, "Polly!"

They looked it over together. The party of the first part was J. J. Cassard.

"And who is J. J. Cassard?" said Polly, trying not to breathe fast. Roger growled:

"One of those Pacific-coast managers trying to jimmy a way into New York."

Hoping to escape the vital question by attacking the details, Roger glanced through the various clauses. It was a splendid contract—for Sheila. The hateful "two-weeks' clause" by which she could be dismissed at a fortnight's notice was omitted and in its place was an agreement to pay for her costumes and a maid.

"Do you mean to say," Kemble blustered, "that Cassard handed you a document like that right off the reel?"

"Oh no," perked Sheila; "he gave me a regular white-slave mortgage at first."

"Where does she learn such language!" gasped Polly.

Sheila went on, "But I whipped him out on every point."

"It looks almost suspicious," said Kemble, and Polly protested.

"I was ten years on the stage before I got my modern costumes and a maid."

"Well," said Sheila, as blandly as if she were a traveling saleswoman describing her wares, "Cassard said I was pretty, and I reminded him that I had the immense advertising value of the great Roger Kemble's name, and I told him I had probably inherited some of the wonderful dramatic ability of Polly Farren. I told him I might take that for my stage name—Farren Kemble."

Father and mother cast their eyes up and shook their heads, but they could not help being pleased by the flattery implied and applied.

Roger said: "Well, if all that is true, we'd better keep it in the family. You'll go with us."

"But you said there was no part for me to play."

"There's the chambermaid."

"No, you don't!" said Sheila. "You don't hide me in any of those 'Did you rings?' and 'Won't you sit down, ma'ams?'"

"We'll have the author build up the part a little, and there's a bit in the third act that's really quite interesting."

Sheila refused flatly. But her mother cried all that night, and her father looked so glum the next morning that she consented to chaperon them for one more year.

She revealed a genuine gift for the stage, and she had a carrying personality. When she entered as the chambermaid and said, "Did you ring?" the audience felt a strangely vivid spark of reality at once. She needed nothing to say. She just was. Like some of the curiously alive figures in the paintings of the Little Dutch masters, she was perfectly in and of the picture, and yet she was rounded and complete. She was felt when she entered and missed when she left.

Two or three times when her mother fell ill Sheila played her part—that of a young widow. She did not look it yet, of course, but there was that same uncanny actuality that had stirred the people who watched her as an infantile Ophelia.

Seeing that she meant to be a star and was meant to be one, her parents gave her the best of their wisdom, taught her little tricks of make-up, and gesture, and economy of gesture; of emphasis by force and of emphasis by restraint; the art of underlining important words and of seeming not to have memorized her speeches, but to be improvising them from the previous speech or from the situation. They taught her what can be taught of the intricate technique of comedy—waiting for the laugh while seeming to hurry past it; making speed, yet scoring points; the great art of listening; the delicate science of when to move and when not to move, and the tremendous power of a turn of the eyes. And, above all, they hammered into her head the importance of sincerity—sincerity.

"There are hundreds of right ways to read any line," Roger would say, "and only one way that's wrong—the insincere way. Insincerity can be shown as much by exaggeration as by indifference. Let your character express what you feel, and the audience will understand you, if it's only a slow closing of the eyes once or a little shift of the weight. Be sincere!"

Two seasons later, Roger's manager brought over from Europe a well-tried success that suited Roger and Polly to a T, but included no rôle at all for Sheila. She simply could not play the fat old dowager, and she simply would not play the laconic housemaid. The time had come for the family to part.

Fathers are always frightened to death of their daughters' welfares in this risky, woman-trapping world. Roger Kemble knew well enough what dangers Sheila ran. Whether they were greater than they would have been in any other walk of life or in the most secluded shelter, he did not know. He knew only that his child's honor and honesty were infinitely dear to him, and that he could not keep her from running along the primrose path of public admiration. He could not be with her always.

He managed to get Sheila an engagement with the production called "A Friend in Need." The part was not important, but she could travel with her great-aunt, Mrs. Vining, who could serve as her guardian and teach her a vast deal about acting as an art and a business. Also Polly decided to give Sheila her own maid, Nettie Pennock, a slim, prim, grim old spinster whose very presence advertised respectability. Pennock had spent most of her life in the theater, and looked as if she had never seen a play. Polly said that she "looked like all the Hard-shell Baptist ministers' wives in the world rolled into one."

But Pennock was broad-hearted and reticent, and as tolerant as ministers' wives ought to be. She was efficient as a machine, and as tireless. She could be a tyrant,

and her faultfindings were sparse and sharp as drops of vinegar from a cruet. Polly was more afraid of them than of all the thumps of the bladder-swatting critics.

Yet that frosty face could smile with the sudden sweetness of sunlight on snow, and Sheila's arms about her melted her at once, except when she had done some mischief or malice. And then Pennock could be thawed only by a genuine and lengthy penance.

Roger urged Polly to fill Sheila's ears with good counsel, but Polly Farren knew how little impression advice makes on those whom no inner instinct impels to do the right thing anyway.

After the usual rehearsals in New York, "A Friend in Need" had the usual preliminary weeks on the road before it was submitted to New York.

When the time came for Sheila to leave home and strike out for herself, it fell to Roger to take her to the train. Polly was suffering from one of those sick headaches of hers which prostrated her when she was not at work, though they never kept her from giving a sparkling performance. Indeed, Kemble used to say that if the Angel Gabriel wanted to raise Polly from the grave on Judgment morning, all the trumpets of the Apocalypse would fail to rouse the late sleeper. But if he murmured "Overture!" she would be there in costume with all her make-up on.

On the way to the station with Sheila, who was as excited as a boy going to sea, Roger was mightily troubled over her. She was indeed going to sea, and in a leaky boat, the frail barge of dreams. He felt that he must speak to her on the Importance of Being Good. The frivolous comedian suffered anguishes of stage-fright, but finally mustered the courage to deliver himself as Polonius might have done if it had been Ophelia instead of Laertes who was setting out for foreign travel.

It was a task to daunt a preachier parent than Roger

Kemble, and it was not easy to talk first principles of behavior to a sophisticated young woman who knew as much about things as Sheila did.

Roger made a dozen false starts and ended in gulps, till Sheila finally said: "What's the matter, old boy? You're trying to say something, but I can't make out what it is. Tell me, and I may be able to throw you the line."

"It's about you, honey. I'm— That is, Polly is— At least your mother and I— Well, anyway—"

"Yes, and then?" said Sheila.

Roger got the bit in his teeth and bolted. "The fact is, young woman, you are all the daughters of your father's and mother's house. We're awfully proud of you, of course. And we know you're going to be a big actress. But we'd rather have you just a good girl than all the stars in the Milky Way squeezed into one. Do you still say your prayers at night, honey?"

"Sometimes," she sighed, "when I'm not too sleepy."

"Well, say 'em in the mornings, then, when you first get up."

"I'm pretty sleepy, then, too."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, say 'em sometimes."

"All right, daddy, I promise. Was that all?"

"Yes! No! That is— You see, Sheila, you're starting out by yourself and you're awfully pretty, and you're pretty young, and the men are always after a pretty girl, especially on the stage. And being on the stage, you're sure to be misjudged, and men will attempt—will say things they wouldn't dare try on a nice girl elsewhere. And you must be very much on your guard."

"I'll try to be, daddy, thank you. Don't you worry."

"You know you'll have to go to hotels and wait in railroad stations and take cabs and go about alone at all hours, and you must be twice as cautious as you'd be otherwise."

"I understand, dear."

"You see, Sheila honey, every woman who is in business

or professional life or is an artist or a nurse or a doctor or anything like that has to stand a lot of insult, but so long as she realizes that it really is an insult for a man to be familiar or anything like that, why, she's all right. But the minute she gets to feeling too free or to acting as if she were a man, or tries to be a good fellow and a Bohemian and all that rot—she's going to give men a wrong impression. And then—well, even a man that is the very decentest sort is likely to—to grow a little too enterprising if a girl seems to encourage him, or even if she doesn't discourage him right at the jump."

"I know."

That little "I know" alarmed him more than ever. He went on with redoubled zeal.

"I want you to remember one thing always, Sheila—you've got only one life to live and one soul to take care of and only one body to keep it in. And it's entirely up to you what you make of yourself. Education and good breeding and all that sort of thing help, but they don't guarantee anything. Even religion doesn't always protect a girl; sometimes it seems to make her more emotional and— Well, I don't know what can protect a girl unless it's a kind of—er—well, a sort of a—conceitedness. Call it self-respect if you want to or anything. But it seems to me that if I were a girl the thing that would keep me straightest would be just that. I shouldn't want to sell myself cheap, or give myself away forever for a few minutes of—excitement, or throw the most precious pearl on earth before any swine of a man. That's it, Sheila—keep yourself precious."

"I'll try to, dad. Don't worry!" she murmured, timidly.

Such discussions are among the most terrifying of human experiences. Roger Kemble was trembling as he went on: "Some day, you know, you'll meet the man that belongs to you, and that you belong to. Save yourself for him, eh?"

Then the modern woman spoke sternly: "Seems to me, daddy, that a girl ought to have some better reason for taking care of herself than just because she's saving herself for some man."

"Of course. You're quite right, my dear. But I only meant—"

"I understand. I'll try to save myself for myself. I don't belong to any man. I belong just to me; and I'm all I've got."

"That's a much better way to put it. Much better." And he sighed with immense relief.

The idea of the man that should make his daughter his own was an odious idea to the father. It was odious now to the girl, too, for she was not yet ready for that stormy crisis when she would make a pride of humility and a rapture of surrender.

CHAPTER VIII

THE play that Sheila was surrendered to, "A Friend in Need," proved a success and raised its young author to such heights of pride and elation that when his next work, an ambitious drama, was produced, he had a long distance to fall. And fell hard.

Young Trivett had tossed off "A Friend in Need" and had won from it the highest praise as a craftsman. He had worked five years on his drama, only to be accused of being "so spoiled by success as to think that the public would endure anything he tossed off."

But the miserable collapse of his *chef-d'œuvre* did not even check the triumph of his *hors-d'œuvre*. "A Friend in Need" ran on "to capacity" until the summer weather turned the theater into a chafing-dish. Then the company was disbanded.

In the early autumn following it was reorganized for a road tour. Of the original company only four or five members were re-engaged—Sheila, Mrs. Vining, Miss Griffen, and Tuell.

During the rehearsals Sheila had paid little attention to the new people. She was doomed to be in their company for thirty or forty weeks and she was in no hurry to know them. She was gracious enough to those she met, but she made no advances to the others, nor they to her. She had noticed that a new man played the taxicab-driver, but she neither knew nor cared about his name, his aim, or his previous condition of servitude.

The Freshmen of Leroy University brought him to her attention with a spectacular suddenness in the guise of a

hero. The blow he struck in her supposed defense served as an ideal letter of introduction.

As soon as the curtain had fallen on the riot, cutting off the view of the battle between the police and the students, Sheila looked about for the hero who had rescued her from Heaven alone knew what outrage.

The neglected member of the troupe had leaped into the star rôle, the superstar rôle of a man who wages a battle in a woman's defense. She ran to him and, seizing his hands, cried:

"How can I ever, ever, ever thank you, Mr.—Mr.—I'm so excited I can't remember your name."

"Eldon—Floyd Eldon, Miss Kemble."

"You were wonderful, wonderful!"

"Why, thank you, Miss Kemble. I'm glad if you—if— To have been of service to you is—is—"

The stage-manager broke up the exchange of compliments with a "Clear! clear! Damn it, the curtain's going up." They ran for opposite wings.

When the play was over Eldon was not to be found, and Sheila went with her aunt to the train. At the hour when Winfield was being released from his cell the special sleeping-car that carried the "Friend in Need" company was three hundred miles or more away and fleeing farther.

When Sheila raised the curtain of her berth and looked out upon the reeling landscape the morning was nearly noon. Yet when she hobbled down the aisle in unbuttoned shoes and the costume of a woman making a hasty exit from a burning building, there were not many of the troupe awake to observe her. Her aunt, however, was among these, for old age was robbing Mrs. Vining of her lifelong habit of forenoon slumber. Like many another of her age, she berated as weak or shiftless what she could no longer enjoy.

But Sheila was used to her and her rubber-stamp approval of the past and rubber-stamp reproval of the present. They went into the dining-car together, Sheila

making the usual theatrical combination of breakfast and lunch. As she took her place at a table she caught sight of her rescuer of the night before.

He was gouging an orange when Sheila surprised him with one of her best smiles. His startled spoon shot a geyser of juice into his eye, but he smiled back in spite of that, and made a desperate effort not to wink. Sheila noted the stoicism and thought to herself, "A hero, on and off."

Later in the afternoon when she had read such morning papers as were brought aboard the train, and found them deadly dull since there was nothing about her in them, and when she had read into her novel till she discovered the familiar framework of it, and when from sheer boredom she was wishing that it were a matinée day so that she might be at her work, she saw Floyd Eldon coming down the aisle of the car.

He had sat in the smoking-room until he had wearied of the amusing reminiscences of old Jaffer, who was always reminiscent, and of the grim silence of Crumb, who was always taciturn, and of the half-smothered groans of Tuell, who was always aching somewhere. At length Eldon had resolved to be alone, that he might ride herd about the drove of his own thoughts. He made his face ready for a restrained smile that should not betray to Sheila in one passing glance all that she meant to him.

To his ecstatic horror she stopped him with a gesture and overwhelmed him by the delightful observation that it was a beautiful day. He freely admitted that it was and would have moved on, but she checked him again to present him to Mrs. Vining.

Mrs. Vining was pleased with the distinguished bow he gave her. It was a sort of old-comedy bow. She studied him freely as he turned in response to Sheila's next confusing words:

"I want to thank you again for coming to my rescue from that horrible brute."

Eldon looked as guilty as if she had accused him of being himself the brute he had saved her from. He threw off his disgusting embarrassment with an effort at a careless shrug:

"It was nothing—nothing at all, I am sure."

"It was wonderful," Sheila insisted. "How powerful you must be to have lifted that monster clear over the apron of the stage into the lap of the orchestra!"

A man never likes to deny his infinite strength, but Eldon was honest enough to protest: "I caught him off his balance, I am afraid. And, besides, it comes rather natural to me to slug a man from Leroy."

"Yes? Why?"

"I am a Grantham man myself. I was on our 'varsity eleven a couple of years."

"Oh!" said Sheila. "Sit down, won't you?"

She felt that she had managed this rather crassly. It would have been more delicate to express less surprise and to delay the invitation to a later point. But it was too late now. He had already dropped into the place beside her, not noticing until too late that he sat upon a novel and a magazine or two and an embroidery hoop on which she had intended to work. But he was on so many pins and needles that he hardly heeded one more.

College men are increasingly frequent on the stage, but not yet frequent enough to escape a little prestige or a little prejudice, according to the point of view. In Sheila's case Eldon gained prestige and a touch of majesty that put her wits to some embarrassment for conversation. It was one thing to be gracious to a starveling actor with a two-line rôle; it was quite another to be gracious to a football hero full of fame and learning.

Mrs. Vining, however, had played *grandes dames* too long to look up to anybody. She felt at ease even in the presence of this big third-baseman, or coxswain, or what-

ever he had been on his football nine. She said, "Been on the stage long, Mr. Eldon?"

Eldon grinned meekly, looked up and down the aisle with mock anxiety, and answered: "The stage-manager isn't listening? This is my first engagement."

"Really?" was the only comment Sheila could think of.

After his long silence in the company, and under the warming influence of Sheila's presence, the snows of pent-up reminiscence came down in a flood of confession:

"I don't really belong on the stage, you know. I haven't a big enough part to show how bad an actor I really could be if I had the chance. But I set my mind on going on the stage, and go I went."

"Did you find it hard to get a position?"

"Well, when I left college and the question of my profession came up, dad and I had several hot-and-heavies. Finally he swore that if I didn't accept a job in his office I need never darken his door again. Business of turning out of house. Father shaking fist. Son exit center, swearing he will never come back again. Sound of door slamming heard off."

Sheila still loved life in theatrical terms. "But what did your poor mother do?" she said.

A film seemed to veil Eldon's eyes as he mumbled: "She wasn't there. She was spared that." Then he gulped down his private grief and went on with his more congenial self-derision: "I left home, feeling like Columbus going to discover America. I didn't expect to star the first year, but I thought I could get some kind of a job. I went to New York and called on all the managers. I was such an ignoramus that I hadn't heard of the agencies. I got to know several office-boys very well before one of them told me about the employment bureaus. Well, you know all about that agency game."

Sheila had been spared the passage through this Inferno on her way to the Purgatory of apprenticeship. But she had heard enough about it to feel sad for him, and she

spared him any allusions to her superior luck. Still, she encouraged him to describe his own adventures.

He told of the hardships he encountered and the siege he laid to the theater before he found a breach in its walls to crawl through. Constantly he paused to apologize for his garrulity, but Sheila urged him on. She had been born within the walls and she knew almost nothing of the struggles that others met except from hearsay. And she had never heard say from just such a man with just such a determination. So she coaxed him on and on with his history, as Desdemona persuaded Othello to talk. With a greedy ear she devoured up his discourse and made him dilate all his pilgrimage. Only, Eldon was not a Blackmoor, and it was of his defeats and not his victories that he told. Which made him perhaps all the more attractive, seeing that he was well born and well made.

He laughed at his own ignorance, and felt none of the pity for himself that Sheila felt for him. When she praised his determination, he sneered at himself:

"It was just bull-headed stubbornness. I was ashamed to go back to my dad and eat veal, and so I didn't eat much of anything for a long while. The only jobs I could get were off the stage, and I held them just long enough to save up for another try. How these actors keep alive I can't imagine. I nearly starved to death. It wouldn't have been much of a loss to the stage if I had, but it wasn't much fun for me. I wore out my clothes and wore out my shoes and my overcoat and my hat. I wore out everything but my common sense. If I'd had any of that I'd have given up."

Mrs. Vining moved uneasily. "If you'd had common sense you wouldn't have tried to get on the stage."

"Auntie!" Sheila gasped. But she put up her old hand like a decayed czarina:

"And if you have common sense you'll never succeed, now that you're here."

When this bewildered Eldon, she added, with the dig-

nity of a priestess: "Acting is an art, not a business; and people come to see artists, not business men. Half of the actors are just drummers traveling about; but the real successes are made by geniuses who have charm and individuality and insight and uncommon sense. I think you're probably just fool enough to succeed. But go on."

Eldon felt both flattered and dismayed by this pronouncement. He began to talk to hide his confusion.

"I'm a fool, all right. Whether I'm just the right sort of a fool— Well, anyway—my money didn't last long, and I owed everybody that would trust me for a meal or a room. The office-boys gave me impudence until I wore that out too, and then they treated me like any old bench-warmer in the park. The agents grew sick of the sight of me. They sent me to the managers until they had instructions not to send me again. But still I stuck at it, the Lord knows why.

"One day I went the rounds of the agencies as usual. When I came to the last one I was so nauseated with the idiocy of asking the same old grocery-boy's question, 'Anything to-day?' I just put my head in at the door, gave one hungry look around, and started away again. The agent—Mrs. Sanchez, it was—beckoned to me, but I didn't see; she called after me, but I didn't hear; she sent an office-boy to bring me back.

"When I squeezed through the crowd in the office it was like being called out of my place in the bread-line to get the last loaf of the day. I felt ashamed of my success and I was afraid that I was going to be asked to take the place of some Broadway star who had suddenly fallen ill.

"Mrs. Sanchez swung open the gate in the rail and said: 'Young man, can you sing?'

"My heart fell to the floor and I stepped on it. I heard myself saying, 'Is Caruso sick?'

"Mrs. Sanchez explained: 'It's not so bad as all that. But can you carry a tune?'

"I told her that I used to growl as loud a bass as the rest of them when we sang on the college fence.

"'That's enough,' said Mrs. Sanchez. 'They're putting on a Civil War play and they want a man to be one of a crowd of soldiers who sing at the camp-fire in one of the acts. The part isn't big enough to pay a singer and there is nothing else to do but get shot and play dead in the battle scene.'

"I told her I thought I could play dead to the satisfaction of any reasonable manager and she gave me a card to the producer.

"Then she said, 'You've never been on the stage, have you?'

"I shook my head. She told me to tell the producer that I had just come in from the road with a play that had closed after a six months' run. I took the card and dashed out of the office so fast I nearly knocked over a poor old thing with a head of hair like a bushel of excelsior. It took me two days to get to the producer, and then he told me that it had been decided not to send the play out, since the theatrical conditions were so bad."

Mrs. Vining interpolated, "Theatrical conditions are like the weather—always dangerous for people with poor circulation."

"I went back to the office," said Eldon, "and told Mrs. Sanchez the situation. The other members of the company had beaten me there. The poor old soul was broken-hearted, and I don't believe she regretted her lost commissions as much as the disappointment of the actors.

"A lot of people have told me she was heartless. She was always good to me, and if she was a little hard in her manner it was because she would have died if she hadn't been. Agents are like doctors, they've got to grow callous or quit. Her office was a shop where she bought and sold hopes and heartbreaks, and if she had squandered

her sympathy on everybody she wouldn't have lasted a week. But for some reason or other she made a kind of pet of me."

Mrs. Vining murmured, "I rather fancy that she was not the first, and won't be the last, woman to do that."

Eldon flushed like a young boy who has been told that he is pretty. He realized also that he had been talking about himself to a most unusual extent with most unusual frankness, and he relapsed into silence until Sheila urged him on.

It was a stupid Sunday afternoon in the train and he was like a traveler telling of strange lands, under the insatiable expectancy of a fair listener. There are few industries easier to persuade a human being toward than the industry of autobiography. Eldon described the dreary Sahara of idleness that he crossed before his next opportunity appeared.

As a castaway sits in the cabin of a ship that has rescued him and smiles while he recounts the straits he has escaped from, and never dreams of the storms that are gathering in his future skies, so Eldon in the Pullman car chuckled over the history of his past and fretted not a whit over the miseries he was hurrying to.

The only thing that could have completed his luxury was added to him when he saw that Sheila, instead of laughing with him, was staring at him through half-closed eyelids on whose lashes there was more than a suspicion of dew. There was pity in her eyes, but in her words only admiration:

"And you didn't give up even then!"

"No," said Eldon; "it is mighty hard knocking intelligence into as thick a skull as mine. I went back to the garage where I had worked as a helper. I had learned something about automobiles when I ran the one my father bought me. But I kept nagging the agencies. Awful idiot, eh?"

To his great surprise the cynical Mrs. Vining put in a word of implied approval:

"We are always reading about the splendid perseverance of men who become leading dry-goods merchants of their towns or prominent politicians or great painters, but the actors know as well as anybody what real perseverance is. And nobody gives them credit for being anything but a lot of dissipated loafers."

Sheila was not interested in generalizations. She wanted to know about the immediate young man before her. She was still child enough to feel tremendous suspense over a situation, however well she knew that it must have a happy ending. When she had been littler the story of Jack the Giant-killer had enjoyed an unbroken run of forty nights in the bedtime repertoire of her mother. And never once had she failed to shiver with delicious fright and suffer anguishes of anxiety for poor Jack whenever she heard the ogre's voice. At the first sound of his *leit motiv*, "Fee, fi, fo, fum—" her little hands would clutch her mother's arm and her eyes would pop with terror. Yet, without losing at all the thrill of the drama, she would correct the least deviation from the sacred text and rebuke the least effort at interpolation.

It was this weird combination of childish credulity, fierce imagination, and exact intelligence that made up her gift of pretending. So long as she could keep that without outgrowing it, as the vast majority do, she would be set apart from the herd as one who could dream with the eyes wide open.

When she looked at Eldon she saw him as the ragged, hungry beggar at the stage door. She saw him turned away and she feared that he might die, though she knew that he still lived. There was genuine anxiety in her voice when she demanded, "How on earth did you ever manage to succeed?"

"I haven't succeeded yet," said Eldon, "or even begun to, but I am still alive. It's hard to get food and em-

ployment in New York, but somehow it's harder still to starve there. One way or another I kept at work and hounded the managers. And one day I happened in at a manager's office just as he was firing an actor who thought he had some rights in the world. He snapped me up with an offer of twenty-five dollars a week. If he had offered me a million it wouldn't have seemed any bigger."

Mrs. Vining had listened with unwonted interest and with some difficulty, for sleep had been tugging at her heavy old eyelids. As soon as she heard that Eldon had arrived in haven at last she felt no further necessity of attention and fell asleep on the instant.

Sheila sighed with relief, too. And the train had purred along contentedly for half a mile before she realized that after all Eldon was not with that company, but with this. Seeing that her aunt was no longer with them in spirit, she lowered her voice to comment:

"But if you went with the other troupe, what are you doing here?"

"Well, you see, I thought I ought to tell Mrs. Sanchez the good news. I thought she would be glad to hear it, and I was going to offer her the commission for all the work she had done and all the time she had spent on me. She looked disappointed when I told her, and she warned me that the manager was unreliable and the play a gamble. She had just found me a position with a company taking an assured success to the road. It was this play of yours. The part was small and the pay was smaller still, but it was good for forty weeks.

"But I was ambitious, and I told her I would take the other. I wanted to create—that was the big word I used—I wanted to 'create' a new part. She told me that the first thing for an actor to do was to connect with a steady job, but I wouldn't listen to her till finally she happened to mention something that changed my mind."

He flushed with an excitement that roused Sheila's curiosity. When he did not go on, she said:

"But what was it that changed your mind?"

Eldon smiled comfortably, and, emboldened by the long attention of his audience, ventured to murmur the truth: "I had seen you act—in New York—in this play, and I—I thought that you were a wonderful actress, and more than that—the most—the most— Well, anyway, Mrs. Sanchez happened to mention that you would be with this company, so I took the part of the taxicab-driver. But I found I was farther away from you than ever—till—till last night."

And then Eldon was as startled at the sound of his words and their immense import as Sheila was. The little word "you" resounded softly like warning torpedoes on a railroad track signaling: "Down brakes! Danger ahead!"

CHAPTER IX

AS Eldon's words echoed back through his ears he knew that he had said too much and too soon. Sheila was afraid to speak at all; she could not improvise the exquisitely nice phrase that should say neither more nor less than enough. Indeed, she could not imagine just what she wanted to say, what she really felt or ought to feel.

The woman was never born, probably, who could find a declaration of devotion entirely unwelcome, no matter from whom. And yet Sheila felt any number of inconveniences in being loved by this man who was a total stranger yesterday and an old acquaintance to-day. It would be endlessly embarrassing to have a member of the company, especially so humble a member, infatuated with her. It would be infinitely difficult to be ordinarily polite to him without either wounding him or seeming to encourage him. She had the theatric gift for carrying on a situation into its future developments. She was silent, but busily silent, dramatizing to-morrows, and the to-morrows of to-morrows.

Eldon's thoughts also were speeding noisily through his brain while his lips were uncomfortably idle. He felt that he had been guilty of a gross indiscretion and he wanted to remove himself from the discomfort he had created, but he could not find the courage to get himself to his feet, or the wit to continue or even to take up some other subject.

It was probably their silence that finally wakened Mrs. Vining. She opened her drowsy eyes, wondering how

long she had slept and hoping that they had not missed her. She realized at once that they were both laboring under some confusion. She was going to ask what it was.

Sheila resented the situation. Already she was a fellow-culprit with this troublesome young man. An unwitting rescuer appeared in the person of the stage-manager who dawdled along the aisle in the boredom of a stage-manager, who can never quite forget his position of authority and is never allowed to forget that his flock are proud individuals who feel that they know more than he does.

Sheila was impelled to appeal to Batterson on Eldon's behalf, but she and the stage-manager had been in a state of armed truce since a clash that occurred at rehearsals. Batterson was not the original producer of the play, but he put out the road company and kept with it.

A reading of Sheila's had always jarred him. He tried to change it. She tried to oblige him, but simply could not grasp what he was driving at. One of those peculiar struggles ensued in which two people are mutually astounded and outraged at their inability to explain or understand.

But if Mr. Batterson was hostile to Sheila, he was afraid of Mrs. Vining, both because he revered her and because she had known him when he was one of the most unpromising beginners that ever attempted the stage. He had never succeeded as an actor, which was no proof of his inability to tell others how to act, but always seemed so to them.

As he would have passed, Mrs. Vining, quite as if Sheila had prompted her, made a gesture of detention:

"Oh, Mr. Batterson, will you do me a great favor?" He bowed meekly, and she said, "Be a good boy and give Mr. Eldon here a chance to do some real work the first opportunity you get."

Batterson sighed. "Good Lord! has he been pestering you, too?"

"He has been telling me of his struggles and his ambitions," Mrs. Vining answered, with reproving dignity, "and I can see that he has ability. He is a gentleman, at least, and that is more than can be said of some of the people who are given some of the rôles."

Batterson did not relish this. He had had one or two battles with Mrs. Vining over some of her stage business and had been withered by her comments on his knowledge of what really went on in real drawing-rooms. She had told him that they were as different as possible from stage drawing-rooms, and he had lacked information to answer. All he said now was:

"I've promised Eldon a dozen times that he should have a try at the first vacancy. But you know this old guard; they never surrender and they never die."

"Except when they get a cue," was Mrs. Vining's drop of acid.

Batterson renewed his pledge and moved on, with a glance in which Eldon felt more threat than promise. But he thanked Mrs. Vining profusely and apologized to Sheila for taking so much of her time talking about himself. This made a good exit speech and he retired to his cell, carrying with him a load of new anxieties and ambitions.

Triply happy was Eldon now. He had been commended to the stage-manager and promised the first opportunity. He was getting somewhere. He had established himself in the good graces of the old duchess of the troupe. He had put his idol, Sheila, under obligations to him. He had ventured to let her know that he had joined the company on her account, and she had not rebuked him. This in itself was a thousand miles on his journey.

The meter of the train had hitherto been but a dry, monotonous clickety-click like the rattle bones of a dolorous negro minstrel. Now it was a jig, a wedding jig. The wheels and the rails fairly sang to him tune after

tune. The amiable hippety-hop fitted itself to any joyful thought that cantered through his heart.

By and by a town came sliding to the windows—Milton, a typical smallish city with a shabby station, a stupid hotel, no history, and no sights; it had reached the gawky age and stopped growing. But Eldon bade it welcome. He liked anybody and any place. He set out for the hotel, swinging his suit-case as if it were the harp of a troubadour. He walked with two or three other men of the company.

Old Jaffer had said: "The Mansion House is the only hotel. It's three blocks to the right from the station and then two blocks to the left." Jaffer knew the least bad hotel and just how to find it in hundreds of towns. He was a living gazetteer. "I've been to every burg in the country, I think," he would say, "and I've never seen one yet that had anything to see." The highest praise he could give a place was, "It's a good hotel town."

But they were all paradises to Eldon. He had fed so dismally and so sparsely, as a man out of a job, that even the mid-Western coffee tasted good to him. Besides, to-day he had fed on honey dew and drunk the milk of paradise.

He was so jubilant that he offered to carry the hand-bag of Vincent Tuell, who labored along at his side, groaning. Eldon's offer offended Tuell, who was just old enough to resent his age. It had already begun to lop dollars off his salary and to cut him out of the line of parts he had once commanded.

Tuell had never reached high—but he had always hoped high. Now he had closed the books of hope. He was on the down grade. His career had not been a peak, but a foot-hill, and he was on the wrong side of that. He received Eldon's proffer as an accusation of years. He answered with a bitter negative, "No, thank you, damn you!"

Eldon apologized with a laugh. He felt as hilariously

contented and sportive as a young pup whom no rebuff can offend. As he strode along he glanced back and saw that Sheila and Mrs. Vining were footing it, too, and carrying such luggage as Pennock could not accommodate. Eldon was amazed. He had supposed that they would ride. He dropped back to Sheila's elbow and pleaded:

"Won't you let me take a cab and ride you to the hotel?"

Sheila thanked him No, and Mrs. Vining finished him off:

"Young man, if you're going to be an actor you must learn to practise small economies—especially in small towns where you gain nothing by extravagance. You never know how short your season may be. The actor who wastes money on cabs in the winter will be borrowing car fare in the summer."

Eldon accepted the repulse as if it were a bouquet. "I see; but at least you must let me carry your suit-cases."

Mrs. Vining threw him much the same answer as Tuell: "I'm not so old as I look, and I travel light."

He turned to Sheila, whose big carry-all was so heavy that it dragged one shoulder down. She looked like the picture of somebody or other carrying a bucket from the well—or was it from a cow? He put out his hand. She turned aside to dodge him. He followed her closely and finally wrested the suit-case from her. Seeing his success, Mrs. Vining yielded him hers also. He let Pennock trudge with hers. And so they walked to the hotel and marched up to the desk.

Jaffer and Tuell had already registered. Eldon thought they might at least have waited till the ladies had had first choice. He was surprised to hear Sheila and Mrs. Vining haggling over the prices of lodging and choosing rooms of moderate cost.

He had no chance to speak to them at the performance or after it, but the next morning he hung about the lobby till train-time. He pretended much surprise at seeing

Sheila,—as if he had not been waiting for her! He was a bad actor. Again he secured the carry-all in spite of her protests. If he had known more he would have seen that she gave up to avoid a battle. But she dropped back with Pennock and left him to walk with Mrs. Vining, who did not hesitate to assail him with her usual directness:

"Young man, you're very nice and you mean very well, but you've got a lot to learn. Have you noticed that when the company gets into a train or a public dining-room, everybody settles as far away as possible from everybody else?"

Eldon had noticed it. It had shocked him. Mrs. Vining went on:

"And no doubt you've seen a big, husky actor let a poor, tired actress drag her own baggage to a far-off hotel."

Eldon had noted that, too, with deep regret. He was astounded when Mrs. Vining said:

"Well, that actor is showing that actress the finest courtesy he can. When men and women are traveling this way on business, the man who is attentive to a woman is doing her a very dubious kindness, unless they're married or expect to be."

"Why?" said Eldon. "Can't he pay her ordinary human courtesy?"

"He'd better not," said Mrs. Vining, "or he'll start the other members of the company and the gaping crowd of outsiders to whispering: 'Oh, he's carrying her valise now! It's a sketch!'"

"A 'sketch'?" Eldon murmured.

"Yes, a—an alliance, an affair. A theatrical troupe is like a little village on wheels. Everybody gossips. Everybody imagines—builds a big play out of a little scenario. And so the actor who is a true gentleman has to keep forgetting that he is one. It's a penalty we women must pay for earning our livings. You see now, don't you, Mr. Eldon?"

He bowed and blushed to realize that it was all meant as a rebuke to his forwardness. He had been treated with consideration, and had immediately proceeded to make a nuisance of himself. He had no right to carry Sheila's burdens, and his insistence had been only an embarrassment to her. He had behaved like a greedy porter at a railroad station to whom one surrenders with wrath in order to silence his demands.

He had not progressed so far as he thought. His train had been ordered to back up. When he had placed Sheila's baggage and Mrs. Vining's in the seats they chose in the day coach, he declined Sheila's invitation to sit down, and sulked in the smoking-car.

The towns that followed Milton were as stupid as Jaffer had said they were. The people who lived there seemed to love them, or at least they did not leave them, but they were dry oases for the lonely traveler. Few of the towns had even a statue, and most of those that had statues would have been the richer for their absence.

Of one thing Eldon made sure—that he would never inflict another of his compromising politenesses on Miss Sheila Kemble. He avoided her so ostentatiously that the other members of the company noticed it. Those who had instantly said when he carried her valise, "Aha! he is carrying her valise now!" were presently saying, "Oh, he's not carrying her valise now!"

CHAPTER X

GRADUALLY the company worked a zigzag passage to Chicago, where it was booked for an indefinite stay. If the "business" were good, it would be announced that, "owing to the unprecedented success, it has been found necessary to extend the run originally contemplated." If the business were not so good, it would be announced that, "owing to previous bookings, it would unfortunately be impossible to extend the run beyond the next two weeks."

Jaffer was saying as they rolled in: "There's no telling in advance what Chicago's going to do to us. New York stood for this rotten show for a whole season; Chicago may be too wise for us. I hope so. It's a ghastly town. The Lake winds are death to a delicate throat. I always lose my voice control in Chicago."

With Jaffer the success he was in was always a proof of the stupidity of the public. In his unending reminiscences, which he ran serially in the smoking-room like another *Arabian Nights*, the various failures he had met were variously described. Those in which he had had a good part were "over the heads of the swine"; those in which he had shone dimly were "absolutely the worst plays ever concocted, my boy—hopeless from the start. How even a manager could fail to see it in the script I can't for the life of me imagine."

Old Jim Crumb said: "Chicago is a far better judge of a play than New York is. Chicago's got a mind of her own. She's the real metropolis. The critics have got a heart; they appreciate honest effort. If they don't like

you they say so fairly, without any of the brutality of New York." Crumb's last appearance in Chicago had been in a highly successful play.

Tuell stopped groaning long enough to growl: "Don't you believe it! Chicago's jealous of New York, and the critics have got their axes out for anything that bears the New York stamp. If they don't like you, they lynch you—that's all, they just lynch you." Tuell's last appearance there had been with a failure.

Eldon felt little interest in the matter one way or another. He had been snubbed in his romance. The other rôle he played would never be dignified even by a tap of the critical bludgeon. He was tired of the stage.

And then the opportunity he had prayed for fell at his feet, after he had ceased to pray for it.

The play opened on a Sunday night. It was Eldon's first performance of a play on the Sabbath. He rather expected something to come through the roof. But the play went without a mishap. The applause was liberal, and the next morning's notices were enthusiastic.

Sheila was picked out for especial praise. The leading woman, Miss Zelma Griffen, was slighted. She was very snappy to Sheila, which added the final touch to Sheila's rapture.

Old Jaffer was complimented and remembered, and now he was loud in the praises of the town, the inspiring, bracing ozone from the Lake, and his splendid hotel. Jim Crumb's bit as a farmer was mentioned, and his previous appearance recalled with "regret that he had not more opportunity to reveal his remarkable gifts of characterization."

This was too much for poor Crumb. He went about town renewing former acquaintances with the fervor of a far voyager who has come home to stay. When he appeared at the second performance his speech was glucose and his gait rippling. In his one scene it was his

duty to bring in a lantern and hold it over an automobile map on which Sheila and Mrs. Vining were trying to trace a lost road. It was a passage of some dramatic moment, but Crumb in his cups made unexpected farce of it by swinging the lantern like a switchman.

No comic genius from Aristophanes *via* Molière to Hoyt has ever yet devised a scene that will convulse an audience like the mistake or mishap of an actor. Poor, befuddled Crumb's wabbly lantern was the laughing hit of the piece. He was too thick to be rebuked that night. Friends took him to his hotel and left him to sleep it off.

When the next morning he realized what he had done, what sacrilege he had committed, he sought relief from insanity in a hair of the dog that bit him. He was soon mellow enough to fall a victim to an hallucination that Tuesday was a matinée day. He appeared at the theater at half-past one, and made up to go on. He fell asleep waiting for his cue, and was discovered when his dressing-room mate arrived at seven o'clock. Then he insisted on descending to report for duty. He was still so befogged that Batterson did not dare let him ruin another performance. He addressed to Crumb that simple phrase which is the theatrical death-warrant:

"Hand me back your part."

With the automatic heroism of a soldier sentenced to execution, Crumb staggered to his room and, fetching the brochure from his trunk, surrendered it to the higher power, revealing a somewhat shaky majesty of despair.

Eldon was standing in the wings, and Batterson thrust the document at him and growled: "You say you're a great actor. I'm from Missouri. Get up in that and show me, to-night."

If he had placed a spluttering bomb in Eldon's hands, and told him to blow up a Czar with it, Eldon could hardly have felt more terrified.

CHAPTER XI

ELDON climbed the three flights of iron stairway to his cubby-hole more drunkenly than Crumb. The opportunity he had counted on was his and he was afraid of it. This was the sort of chance that had given great geniuses their start, according to countless legends. And he had been waiting for it, making ready for it.

Weeks before during the rehearsals and during the first performances he had hung about in the offing, memorizing every part, till he had found himself able to reel off whole scenes with a perfection and a vigor that thrilled him—when he was alone. Crumb's rôle had been one of the first that he had memorized. But now, when he propped the little blue book against his make-up box and tried to read the dancing lines, they seemed to have no connection whatsoever with the play. He would have sworn he had never heard them. He had been told that the best method for quickly memorizing a part was to photograph each page or "side." But the lines danced before him at an intoxicated speed that would have defied a moving-picture camera.

He mumbled good counsels to himself, however, as if he were undertaking the rescue of a drowning heroine, and at length the letters came to a focus, the words resumed their familiarity.

He had received the part nearly an hour before the time for the overture, that faint rumor which is to the actor what the bugle-call is to the soldier. By half past seven he found that he could whisper the lines to himself without a slip.

The character he was to impersonate did not appear until the third act, but Eldon was in the wings made up and on tiptoe with readiness when the first curtain rose. His heart went up with it and lodged in his pharynx, where it throbbed chokingly.

The property-man had been recruited to replace Eldon as the taxicab-driver, but Eldon was on such tenter-hooks that when his old cue came for entrance he started to walk on as usual. Only a hasty backward shove from the arm of the property-man saved him from a public blunder.

The rest of the play seemed to unfold itself with an unendurable slowness. The severer critics had remarked on this.

As Eldon watched, the lines he heard kept jostling the lines he was trying to remember and he fell into a panic of uncertainty. At times he forgot where he was and interfered with the entrances and exits of the other actors, yet hardly heard the rebukes they flung at him.

Sheila, following one of her cues to "exit laughing L 2 E," ran plump into Eldon's arms. He was as startled as a sleep-walker suddenly awakened, and clung to her to keep from falling. His stupor was pleasingly troubled by a vivid sense of how soft and round her shoulders were when he caught them in his hands.

As he fell back out of her way he trod upon Mrs. Vining's favorite toe and she swore at him with an old-comedy vigor. She would have none of his apology, and the stage-manager with another oath ordered him to his room.

Once there, he fell to studying his lines anew. The more he whispered them to himself the more they eluded him. The vital problem of positions began to harass him. He began to wonder just where Crumb had stood.

He had learned from watching the rehearsals that few things upset or confuse actors like a shift of position. They learned their lines with reference to the geography of the stage and seemed curiously bewildered if the actor

whom they had addressed on the right side appeared on the left.

Eldon foresaw himself throwing Sheila and Mrs. Vining out of their stride by standing up-stage when he should stand down, or right when he should stand left. He knew there was an etiquette about "giving the stage" to the superior characters. He remembered one rather heated argument in which Batterson had insinuated that old Mrs. Vining had been craftily "stealing the stage" from one young woman who was selfish enough in all conscience, but who had foolishly imagined that the closer she was to the audience the more she commanded it.

Eldon was disgusted with his ability to forget what he had watched incessantly. He was to make his entrance from the left, yet, as he recollected it, Crumb had stood to the right of Sheila as he held the lantern over the map. Now he wondered how he was to get round her. This bit of stage mechanism had always impressed him. He had seen endless time spent by the stage-manager in trying to devise a natural and inconspicuous method for attaining the simple end of moving an actor from one side of a table to the other side. At first he would have said, bluntly, "The way to go round a table is to go round it." But he had finally realized that the audience must always be taken into account while seeming always to be ignored.

The more he pondered his brief rôle the more intricate it grew. It began to take on the importance of Hamlet. He repeated it over and over until he fell into a panic of aphasia.

Suddenly he heard the third act called and ran down the steps to secure his lantern. It was not to be found. The property-man was not to be found. When both were discovered, the lighting of the lantern proved too intricate for Eldon's bethumbed fingers. The disgusted property-man performed it for him. He took his place in the wings.

Agues and fevers made a hippodrome of his frame.

He saw his time approaching. He saw Sheila unfolding the road-map, scanning it closely. She was going to see the farmer approaching with a lantern. She was going to call to him to lend her the light of it. Now she saw him. She called to him. But he must not start yet, for he was supposed to be at a distance. She called again. She spoke to her aunt.

Now is the time! No, not yet! Now! Not yet!

"Why, here you are!" said Sheila.

But he was not there. He was a cigar Indian riveted to the floor. She beckoned to him, and summoned him in a stage whisper, but he did not move. Batterson dashed from his position near the curtain and shoved him forward, with a husky comment, "Go on, you—"

Eldon never knew what Batterson called him, but he was sure that he deserved it. He started like a man who has fallen out of bed. He tripped, dropped to one knee, recovered himself with the lurch of a stumbling horse, and plunged into the scene.

The quick and easy way to extinguish a lantern is to lower it quickly and lift it with a snap. That is what Eldon did. He found himself in the presence of two actresses on a little strip of dark beach with the audience massed threateningly before it like a tremendous phosphorescent billow curved inward for the crash. The billow shook a little as Eldon stumbled; a few titters ran through it in a whispering froth.

CHAPTER XII

ELDON was unaware that his light was out. He was unaware of almost everything important. He forgot his opening lines and marched across the stage with the granite tread of the statue that visited Don Juan.

Sheila improvised at once a line to supply what Eldon forgot. But she could not improvise a flame on a wick. Indeed, she had not noticed that the flame was missing. Even when Eldon, with the grace of a scarecrow, held out the cold black lantern, she went on studying the map and cheerily recited:

"Oh, that's better! Now we can see just where we are."

The earthquake of joy that smote the audience caught her unaware. The instant enormity of the bolt of laughter almost shook her from her feet. They do well to call it "bringing down the house." There was a sound as of splitting timbers and din upon din as the gallery emptied its howls into the orchestra and the orchestra sent up shrieks of its own. The sound was like the sound that Samson must have heard when he pulled the temple in upon him.

Sheila and Mrs. Vining were struck with the panic that such unexpected laughter brings to the actor. They clutched at their garments to make sure that none of them had slipped their moorings. They looked at each other for news. Then they saw the dreadfully solemn Eldon holding aloft the fireless lantern.

The sense of incongruity that makes people laugh got them, too. They turned their backs to the audience and fought with their uncontrollable features. Few things

delight an audience like the view of an actress broken up. It is so successful that in comic operas they counterfeit it.

The audience was now a whirlpool. Eldon might have been one of the cast-iron effigies that hold up lanterns on gate-posts; he could not have been more rigid or more unreal. His own brain was in a whirlpool, too, but not of mirth. Out of the eddies emerged a line. He seized it as a hope of safety and some desperate impulse led him to shout it above the clamor:

"It ain't a very big lantern, ma'am, but it gives a heap o' light."

Sheila's answer was lost in the renewed hubbub, but it received no further response from Eldon. His memory was quite paralyzed; he couldn't have told his own name. He heard Sheila murmuring to comfort him:

"Can't you light the lantern again? Don't be afraid. Just light it. Haven't you a match? Don't be afraid!"

If Eldon had carried the stolen fire of Prometheus in his hand he could not have kindled tinder with it. He heard Mrs. Vining growling:

"Get off, you damned fool, get off!"

But the line between his brain and his legs had also blown out a fuse.

The audience was almost seasick with laughter. Ribs were aching and cheeks were dripping with tears. People were suffering with their mirth and the reinfection of laughter that a large audience sets up in itself. Eldon's glazed eyes and stunned ears somehow realized the activity of Batterson, who was epileptic in the wings and howling in a strangled voice:

"Come off, you—! Come off, or—I'll come and kick you off!"

And now Eldon was more afraid of leaving than of staying.

In desperation Sheila took him by the elbow and started him on his way. Just as the hydrophobic Batterson was

about to shout, "Ring!" Eldon slipped slowly from the stage.

Little Batterson met the blinded Cyclops and was only restrained from knocking him down by a fear that he might knock him back into the scene. As he brandished his arms about the giant he resembled an infuriated spider attacking a helpless caterpillar.

Batterson's oration was plentifully interlarded with simple old Anglo-Saxon terms that can only be answered with a blow. But Eldon was incapable of resentment. He understood little of what was said except the reiterated line, "If you ever ask me again to let you play a part I'll—"

Whatever he threatened left Eldon languid; the furthest thing from his thoughts was a continuance upon the abominable career he had insanely attempted.

He stalked with iron feet up the iron stairs to his dressing-room, put on his street clothes, and went to his hotel. He had forgotten to remove his greast-paint, the black on his eyebrows and under his eyes, or the rouge upon his mouth. A number of passers-by gave him the entire sidewalk and stared after him, wondering whether he were on his way to the madhouse or the hospital.

The immensity of the disaster to the play was its salvation. The audience had laughed itself to a state of exhaustion. The yelps of hilarity ended in sobs of fatigue. The well-bred were ashamed of their misbehavior and the intelligent were disgusted to realize that they had abused the glorious privilege of laughter and debauched themselves with mirth over an unimportant mishap to an unfortunate actor who had done nothing intrinsically humorous.

Sheila and Mrs. Vining went on with the scene, making up what was necessary and receiving the abjectly submissive audience's complete sympathy for their plight

and extra approval for their ingenuity in extricating themselves from it. When the curtain fell upon the act there was unusual applause.

To an actor the agony of "going up" in the lines, or "fading," is not much funnier after the first surprise than the death or wounding of a soldier is to his comrade. The warrior in the excitement of battle may laugh hysterically when a friend or enemy is ludicrously maimed, when he crumples up and grimaces sardonically, or is sent heels over head by the impact of a shell. But there is little comfort in the laughter since the same fate may come to himself.

The actor has this grinning form of death always at his elbow. He may forget his lines because they are unfamiliar or because they are old, because another actor gives a slightly different cue, some one person laughs too loudly in the audience, or coughs, or a baby cries, or for any one of a hundred reasons. That fear is never absent from the stage. It makes every performance a fresh ordeal. And the actor who has faltered meets more sympathy than blame.

If Eldon had not sneaked out of the theater and had remained until the end of the play he would have found that he had more friends than before in the company. Even Batterson, after his tirade was over, regretted its violence, and blamed himself. He had sent a green actor out on the stage without rehearsal. Batterson was almost tempted to apologize—almost.

But Eldon was not to be found. He was immured in the shabby room of his cheap hotel sick with nausea and feverish with shame.

Somehow he lived the long night out. He read the morning papers fiercely through. There were no headlines on the front page describing his ruinous incapacity. There was not even a word of allusion to him or his tragedy in the theatrical notices. He was profoundly glad of his obscurity and profoundly convinced that ob-

scurity was where he belonged. He wrote out a note of humble apology and resignation. He resolved to send it by messenger and never to go near that theater again, or any other after he had removed his trunk.

With the utmost reluctance he forced himself to go back to the scene of his shame. The stage-door keeper greeted him with a comforting indifference. He had evidently known nothing of what had happened. Stage-door keepers never do. None of the actors was about, and the theater was as lonely and musty as the tomb of the Capulets before Romeo broke in upon Juliet's sleep.

Eldon mounted to his dressing-room and stared with a rueful eye at the make-up box which he had bought with all the pride a boy feels in his first chest of tools. He tried to tell himself that he was glad to be quit of the business of staining his face with these unmanly colors and of rubbing off the stains with effeminate cold-creams. He threw aside the soiled and multicolored towel with a gesture of disdain. But he was too honest to deceive himself. The more he denounced the actor's calling the more he denounced himself for having been incompetent in it. He writhed at the memory of the hardships he had undergone in gaining a foothold on the stage and at the poltroonery of leaping overboard to avoid being thrown overboard.

As he left the theater to find an expressman to call for his trunk he looked into the letter-box where there was almost never a letter for him. To his surprise he found his name on a graceful envelope gracefully indited. He opened it and read the signature first. It was a note from Sheila.

Eldon's eyes fairly bulged out of his head with amazed enchantment. His heart ached with joy. He went back to his dressing-room to read the letter over and over.

DEAR MR. ELDON,—Auntie John and I tried to see you last night, but you had gone. She was afraid that you would grieve

too deeply over the mishap. It was only what might have happened to anybody. Auntie John says that she has known some of the most famous actors to do far worse. Sir Charles Wyndham went up in his lines and was fired at *his* first appearance. She wants to tell you some of the things that happened to her. They had to ring down on her once. She wants you to come over to our hotel and have tea with us this afternoon. Please do!

Heartily,

SHEILA KEMBLE.

There was nothing much in the letter except an evident desire to make light of a tragedy and cheer a despondent soul across a swamp. Eldon did not even note that it was mainly about Aunt John. To him the letter was luminous with a glow of its own. He kissed the paper a dozen times. He resolved to conquer the stage or die. The stage should be the humble stepping-stone to the conquest of Sheila Kemble. Thereafter it should be the scene of their partnership in art. He would play Romeo to her Juliet, and they should play other rôles together till "Mr. and Mrs. Eldon" should be as famous for their art as for their domestic bliss.

Had she not already made a new soul of him, scattering his fright with a few words and recalling him to his duty and his opportunity? He would redeem himself to-night. To-night there should be no stumbling, no gloom in the lantern, no gaiety in the audience during his scene. To-night he would show Batterson how little old Crumb had really made of the part, drunk or sober.

He placed the letter as close to his heart as he could get it, and it warmed him like a poultice. He would go shave himself again and brush up a bit for Sheila's tea-fête.

As he groped slowly down the dark stairway he heard voices on the stage. He recognized Crumb's husky tones:

"If you'll give me one more chance, Val, I swear I'll never disappoint you again. I'm on the water-mobile for good this time."

Eldon felt sorry for the poor old man. He paused to hear Batterson's epitaph on him:

"Well, Jim, I'll give you another try. But it's against my will."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Val!"

"Don't thank me. Thank that dub, Eldon. If he hadn't thrown the scene last night you'd never get another look-in. No more would you if I could pick up anybody here. So you can go on to-night, but if your foot slips again, Jim, so help me, you'll never put your head in another of our theaters."

As Crumb's heart went up, Eldon's followed the see-saw law. All his hopes and plans were collapsed. He would not go to Sheila's tea with this disgrace upon him and sit like a death's-head in her presence.

And how could he present himself at her hotel in the shabby clothes he wore? She and her aunt were living expensively in Chicago. It was good advertisement to live well there; at least it was a bad advertisement not to. It was a bad advertisement for Eldon to appear anywhere. He was under the buffets of fortune. But he tore up his resignation.

Now of all times he needed the comfort of her cheer. Now of all times he could not ask it or accept it. He wrote her a note of devout gratitude, and said that a previous engagement with an old college friend prevented his accepting her gracious hospitality. His old college friend was himself, and they sat in his boarding-house cell and called each other names.

CHAPTER XIII

ELDON resumed the livery of the taxicab-driver and spoke his two lines each night with his accustomed grace, and received his accustomed tribute of silence. He arrived on the stage just before his cue, and he went to his room just after his exit.

He avoided Sheila, and she, feeling repulsed, turned her attention from him. Friends of her father and mother and friends of her school days besieged her with entertainment. People who took pride in saying they knew somebody on the stage sought introductions. Rich or handsome young men were presented to her at every turn. They poured their praises and their prayers into her pretty ears, but got no receipt for them nor any merchandise of favor. She was not quite out of the hilarious stage of girlhood. She said with more philosophy than she realized that she "had no use for men." But they were all the more excited by her evasive charms. Her prettiness was ripening into beauty and the glow of youth from within gave her a more shining aureole than even the ingenuities of stage make-up and lighting. Homes of wealth were open to her and her growing clientèle frequented the theater. Miss Griffen was voted common, and left to the adulation of the fast young men.

The traveling-manager of the company was not slow to notice this. He saw that Sheila had not only the rare gifts of dramatic instinct and appeal, but that she had the power of attracting the approval of distinguished people as well as of the general. Men of all ages delighted in her; and this was still more important—women of all

ages liked her, paid to see her. Women who gave great receptions in brand-new palaces bought up all the boxes or several rows in the orchestra in honor of Sheila Kemble. School-girls clambered to the balcony and shop-girls to the gallery to see Sheila Kemble.

The listening manager heard the outgoing voices again and again saying such things as, "It's the third time I've seen this. It's not much of a play, but Sheila Kemble—isn't she sweet?"

The company-manager and the house-manager and the press agent all wrote to Reben, the manager-in-chief:

"Keep your eye on Kemble. She's got draught. She makes 'em come again."

And Reben, who had made himself a plutocrat with twenty companies on the road, and a dozen theaters, owned or leased—Reben who had grown rich by studying his public, planned to make another fortune by exploiting Sheila Kemble. He kept the secret to himself, but he set on foot a still hunt for the play that should make her while she seemed to be making it. He schemed how to get her signature to a five-year contract without exciting her cupidity to a duel with his own. He gave orders to play her up gradually in the publicity. The thoughts of managers are long, long thoughts.

He gave out an interview to the effect that what the public wanted was "Youth—youth, that beautiful flower which is the dearest memory of the old, and the golden delight of the young."

His chief publicity man, Starr Coleman, a reformed dramatic critic, wrote the interview for Reben, explained it to him, and was proud of it with the vicarious pride of those strange scribes whose lives are devoted to getting for others what they deny to themselves.

Reben had told Coleman to play up strong his belief in the American dramatist, particularly the young dramatist. Reben always did this just before he set out on his annual European shopping-tour among the foreign play-bazars.

Over there he could inspect the finished products of expert craftsmen; he could see their machines in operation, in lieu of buying pigs in pokes from ambitious Yankees who learned their trade at the managers' expense.

This widely copied "Youth" interview brought down on Reben's play-bureau a deluge of American manuscripts, almost all of them devoid of theme or novelty, redolent of no passion except the passion for writing a play, and all of them crude in workmanship. Reben kept a play-reader—or at least a play-rejector, and paid him a moderate salary to glance over submitted manuscripts so that Reben could make a bluff at having read them before he returned them. This timid person surprised Reben one day by saying:

"There's a play here with a kind of an idea in it. It's hopeless as it stands, of course, but it might be worked over a little. It's written by a man named Vicksburg, or Vickery, or something like that. Funny thing—he suggests that Sheila Kemble would be the ideal woman for the principal part. And, do you know, I've been thinking she has the makings of a star some day. Had you ever thought of that?"

"No," said Reben, craftily.

"Well, I believe she'll bear watching."

In after-years this play-returner used to say, "I put Reben on to the idea that there was star material in Kemble, before he ever thought of it himself."

But long before either of them thought of Sheila Kemble as a star, that destiny had been dreamed and planned for her by Sheila Kemble.

Frivolous as she appeared on the stage and off, her pretty head was full of sonorous ambitions. That head was not turned by the whirlwinds of adulation, or drugged by the bouquets of flattery, because it was full of self-criticism. She was struggling for expressions that she could not get; she was groping, listening, studying, trying, discarding, replacing.

She thought she was free from any nonsense of love. Nonsense should not thwart her progress and make a fool of her, as it had of so many others. It should not interrupt her career or ruin it as it had so many others. She would make friends with men, oh yes. They were so much more sensible, as a rule, than women, except when they grew sentimental. And that was a mere form of preliminary sparring with most of them. Once a girl made a fellow understand that she was not interested in spoony nonsense, he became himself and gave his mind a chance. And all the while nature was rendering her more ready to command love from without, less ready to withstand love from within. She was becoming more and more of an actress. But still faster and still more was she becoming a woman.

While Sheila was drafting herself a future, Eldon was gnashing his teeth in a pillory of inaction. He could make no step forward and he could not back out. He had taken cheap and nasty lodgings in the same boarding-house with Vincent Tuell, who added to his depression by his constant distress. Tuell could not sleep nights or days; he filled Eldon's ears with endless denunciations of the stage and with cynical advice to chuck it while he could. Eldon would probably have taken Tuell's advice if Tuell had not urged it so tyrannically. In self-defense Eldon would protest:

"Why don't you leave it yourself, man? You ought to be in the hospital or at home being nursed."

And Tuell would snarl: "Oh, I'd chuck it quick enough if I could. But I've got no other trade, and there's the pair of kiddies in school—and the wife. She's sick, too, and I'm here. God! what a business! It wouldn't be so bad if I were getting anywhere except older. But I've got a rotten part and I'm rotten in it. Every night I have to breeze in and breeze out and fight like the devil to keep from dying on the job. And never a laugh do

I get. It's one of those parts that reads funny and rehearses the company into convulsions and then plays like a column from the telephone-book. I've done everything I could. I put in all the old sure-fire business. I never lie down. I trip over rugs, I make funny faces, I wear funny clothes, but does anybody smile?—nagh! I can't even fool the critics. I haven't had a clipping I could send home to the wife since I left the big town."

Eldon had been as puzzled as Tuell was. He had watched the expert actor using an encyclopedia of tricks, and never achieving success. Tuell usually came off dripping with sweat. The moment he reached the wings his grin fell from him like a cheap comic mask over a tragic grimace of real pain and despair. In addition to his mental distress, his physical torment was incessant. In his boarding-house Tuell gave himself up to lamentations without end. Eldon begged him to see a doctor, but Tuell did not believe in doctors.

"They always want to get their knives into you," he would growl. "They're worse than the critics."

One day Eldon made the acquaintance of a young physician named Edie, who had recently hung a sign in the front window and used the parlor as an office during certain morning hours. Patients came rarely, and the physician berated his profession as violently as Tuell his. Eldon persuaded the doctor to employ some of his leisure in examining Tuell. He persuaded Tuell to submit, and the doctor's verdict came without hesitation or delicacy:

"Appendicitis, old man. The quicker you're operated on the better for you."

"What did I tell you?" Tuell snarled. "Didn't I say they were like critics? Their only interest in you is to knife you."

The young doctor laughed. "Perhaps the critics turn up the truth now and then, too."

But Tuell answered, bitterly: "Well, I've got to stand them. I haven't got to stand for you other butchers."

Eldon apologized for his friend's rudeness, but the doctor took no offense: "It's his pain that's talking," he said. "He's a sick man. He doesn't know how sick he is."

One matinée day Tuell was like a hyena in the wings. He swore even at Batterson. On the stage he was more violently merry than ever. After the performance Eldon looked into his dressing-room and asked him to go to dinner with him. Tuell refused gruffly. He would not eat to-day. He would not take off his make-up. The sweat was everywhere about his greasy face. His jaw hung down and he panted like a sick dog. Eldon offered to bring him in some food—sandwiches or something. Tuell winced with nausea at the mention. Then an anguish twisted through him like a great steel gimlet. He groaned, unashamed. Eldon could only watch in ignorant helplessness. When the spasm was over he said:

"You've got to have a doctor, old man."

"I guess so," Tuell sighed. "Get that young fellow, Edie. He won't rob me much. And he'll wait for his fee."

Eldon made all haste to fetch Edie from the boarding-house. They returned to find Tuell on the floor of his room, writhing and moaning, unheeded in the deserted theater. The doctor gave Eldon a telephone number and told him to demand an ambulance at once.

Tuell heard the word, and broke out in such fierce protest that the doctor countermanded the order.

"I can't go to any hospital now," Tuell raged. "Haven't you any sense? You know there's an evening performance. Get me through to-night, and I can rest all day to-morrow. I've got to play to-night. I've got to! There's no understudy ready."

He played. They set a chair for him in the wings and the physician waited there for him, piercing his skin with pain-deadening drugs every time he left the stage. There was sympathy enough from the company. Even Batterson was gentle, his fierce eyes fiercer with the cruelty of

the situation. The house was packed, and "ringing down on capacity" is not done.

Tuell sat in a stupor, breathing hard like a groggy prize-fighter. But whenever his cue came it woke him as if a ringside gong had shrilled. He flung off his suffering and marched out to his punishment. Only, to-night, somehow, he lacked his usual speed. The suffering and the bromides dulled him so that in place of dashing on the stage he sauntered on; in place of slamming his lines back he just uttered them.

And somehow the laughter came that had never come before—the laughter the author had imagined and had won from the company at the first reading from the script.

From the wings they could see Tuell's knuckles whiten where he clung to a chair to keep from falling.

The audience loved Tuell to-night, never suspected his anguishes, and waited for him, laughed when he appeared. For his final exit he had always stumbled off, whooping with stage laughter. It had always resounded unaccompanied. To-night he was so spent that he was capable only of a dry little chuckle. To his ears it was the old uproar. To the audience it was the delicious giggle of this spring's wind in last year's leaves. It tickled the multitude and all those united titters made a thunder.

Tuell staggered past the dead-line of the wings and fell forward into Eldon's arms, whispering:

"I got 'em that time. Damn 'em, I got 'em at last."

Eldon helped him to his chair, helped lift him in his chair and carry him to the ambulance. Tuell didn't know whither they were taking him. He clawed at Eldon's arm and muttered:

"I must write to the wife and tell her how I killed 'em to-night. And I've got the trick now. I've just found the secret—just to-night. Of course there wouldn't be a critic there. Oh no, of course not."

But there was a Critic there.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning, as Eldon was leaving his boarding-house to call on Tuell at the hospital, he was astounded to see Batterson at the foot of the steps.

"I'm looking for you," said the stage-manager.

Batterson's eyes were so bloodshot and so wet that Eldon stared his surprise. Batterson grumbled:

"No, I'm not drunk. Tried to get drunk, but couldn't."

Eldon was at a loss for what to say to this. Suddenly Batterson was clinging to his arm, and sobbing with head bent down to hide his weakness from the passers-by.

"Why, Mr. Batterson," Eldon stammered, "what's wrong?"

"Tuell's dead."

"No! My God!"

"He never came out of the ether. They were too late to save him. The appendix had burst while he was working last night."

Eldon, remembering that uncanny battle, felt the gush of brine to his eyes. He hung his head for concealment, too.

Batterson raged on: "Remember what Hamlet said: 'They say he made a good end.' Tuell was only a mummer, but he died on the firing-line, makin' 'em laugh. If he'd been a soldier trying to save somebody from paying taxes without representation or trying to protect some millionaire's oil-wells, or a fireman trying to rescue somebody's furniture—they'd have called him a damned hero. But he was only an actor—he only tried to make people happy. He was a comedian, and not a good

comedian—just a hard worker; one of these stage soldiers trying to keep the theater open.

"He did the best he knew how. The critics ripped him open and made him funnier than he could make himself. But he kept right on. I used to roast him worse than they did, God help me! But he never laid down on us. He died in his make-up. They didn't take his grease-paint off till afterward. They didn't know how. I had to do it for him when I got there. Poor old painted face, with the comedian's smile branded on it! That was his trade-mark. He was only an actor."

Eldon noted that Batterson had led him, not to the hospital, but to the theater, with its electric signs, its circus lithographs, its gaudy ballyhoo of advertisement.

Batterson groaned: "Well, here's the shop. We've got to do what Tuell did. The theater's got to keep open. It's another sell-out to-night. Somebody has to play Tuell's part to-night. I want you to."

In spite of the horror that filled his heart Eldon felt a shaft of hope like a thrust of lightning in the night. Then the dark closed in again, for Batterson went on:

"It's only for to-night, old boy. I've wired to New York and a good man 'll be here to-morrow. But there's to-night. You've got to go on. You fell down the other time, and I guess I told you so, but you didn't have a rehearsal. I can coach you up to-day. I've called the other people. They ought to be here now."

And so they were.

On the gloomy stage before the empty house the company stood about in somber garb, under the oppression of Tuell's death. Batterson walked down to the footlights, clapped his hands, and said:

"Places, please, ladies and gentlemen, for poor old Tuell's first scene. Mr. Eldon will play the part to-night."

Those who were not on at the entrance drew to the sides. The others moved here and there and stood at their posts.

Batterson directed with an unwonted calm, with a dismal patience.

The part Eldon held in his hand had been taken from Tuell's trunk. The dead hands seemed to cling to it with grisly jealousy. The laughter of Tuell seemed to haunt the place like the echo of a maniac's voice. Eldon could not give any color to the lines. He could barely utter them. The company gave him his cues with equal lifelessness.

Sheila was present and read her flippancies in a voice of terror—the terror of youth before the swoop of death. Mrs. Vining muttered her cynicisms with the drear bitterness of one to whom this familiar sort of thing had happened once more.

When the detached scenes had been run over several times Batterson dismissed Eldon first that he might go and study. As he went he heard Batterson saying:

"Help him out to-night, ladies and gentlemen. Do the best you can. To-morrow we'll have a regular man here. And now about poor Tuell. Some of the comic-opera people in town will sing at his funeral. His wife is coming out to get him. Mr. Reben telegraphed to pay the expenses of taking him back. I guess he didn't leave the wife anything much—except some children. We'd better get up a little benefit, I guess—a matinée, probably. The other troupes in town will help, of course. If any of you know any good little one-act plays, let's have 'em. I've got a screaming little farce we might throw on. I think I can get some of the vaudeville people to do a few comic turns."

That night Eldon slipped into the dead man's shoes—at least he wore the riding-boots and the hunting-coat and carried the crop that Tuell had worn. Tuell had had them made too large—for the comic effect that did not come. They fitted Eldon fairly well. But it was like acting in another man's shroud.

He was without ambition, without hope of personal profit. He was merely a stop-gap. He was too completely gloomy even to feel afraid of the audience. He was only a journeyman finishing another man's job.

His memory worked like a machine, so independently of his mind that he seemed to have a phonograph in his throat. He kept wondering at the little explosions of laughter at his words.

He saw the surprise in Sheila's eyes as he brought down the house—with so different a laughter now. He murmured to her in sudden dread, "Are they guying me again?"

"No, no," she answered. "Go on; you're splendid!"

The news of Tuell's death had taken little space in the evening papers. The audience, as a whole, was oblivious of it, or of what he had played. There was none of the regret on the other side of the footlights that solemnized the stage. The play had been established as a successful comedy. People came to laugh, and laughed with confidence.

But the pity of Tuell's fate ruined any joy Eldon might have taken in the success he was winning. He played the part through in the same dull, indifferent tone. When he made his final exit he laughed as he had heard Tuell laugh, with uncanny mimicry as if a ghost inhabited him. He was hardly conscious of the salvo of applause that followed him. He supposed that some one still on the stage had earned it. He sighed with relief as he reached the shelter of the dark wings. Batterson, who had hovered near him, ready with the unnecessary prompt-book, glared at him in amazement and growled:

"Good Lord! Eldon, who'd have ever picked you for a comedian?"

Eldon smiled at what he imagined to be sarcasm, and took from his pocket the little pamphlet he had carried with him for quick reference. He offered it to Batterson. Batterson waved it back.

"Keep it, my boy. When the other fellow gets here from New York he can play your old part."

CHAPTER XV

THE next night Eldon reached the theater in a new mood. He had been promoted. He still felt sorry for poor Tuell. The grief of the wife whom he had met at the train and taken to the undertaker's shop where Tuell rested had torn his heart as with claws. He had told her all things beautiful of Tuell. He had wept to see her weep. He wept his heart clean as a sheep's heart.

As Villon said, "The dead go quick." Eldon was ashamed to be so merciless, but in spite of himself ambition blazed up in him. He was a comedian. Batterson had told him so. The house had told him so. Sheila had murmured, "You're splendid."

And now he was a comedian with a screamingly funny rôle. Now he could build it up. He had been working on it half unconsciously all night and all day.

The second night he marched into the scene with the authority of one who is about to be very funny. In his first scenes he delivered his lines with enthusiasm, with appreciation of their humor. He took pains not to "walk into his laughs" as he had done the night before, when he had not expected any laughs. He waited for his laughs. He was amazed to note that they did not come. His pause left a hole in the action. He worked harder, underlined his important words, cocked his head as one who says, "The story I am about to tell you is the funniest thing you ever heard. You'll die when you hear it."

It was the scene that died. A new form of stage-fright sickened him. Hope perished. He was not a comedian, after all. His one success had been an accident.

When the first curtain fell he slunk away by himself to avoid Batterson's searching eyes. To complete his shame he saw that Batterson was talking earnestly with the newcomer from New York.

Old Mrs. Vining sauntered his way. He tried to escape, but the heavy standard of a bunch-light cut him off. She approached him and began in that acid tone of hers:

"Young man, there are two things that are important to a comedian. One is to get a laugh, and the other is to nail it. You got your laughs last night and you've lost 'em to-night. Do you know why?"

"If I only did! I'm playing twice as hard to-night."

"You bet you are, and you're hard as zinc. You keep telling the audience how funny you're going to be, and that finishes you. Now you've lived long enough to know that there are few jokes in the world so funny that they can stand being boosted before they're told. Play your part straight, man. You can fake pathos and rub it in, but of all things always play comedy straight.

"And another thing, don't fidget! One of the best comedians that ever walked the stage told me once, 'I know only one secret for getting laughs, and that is, Nobody must move when the laugh comes.' But to-night you never waited for anybody else to kill your laughs. You butchered 'em yourself by lolling your head and making fool gestures. Quit it! Now you go on in the next act and play the part as you did last night. Be gloomy and quiet and depressed. That's what makes 'em laugh out there—the sight of your misery. There's nothing funny to them in your being so damned cheerful as you were to-night."

Eldon said, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Vining." But he was not convinced of anything except his fatal and eternal unfitness to be an actor. He walked into the second act carrying his old burden of dejection; he rather moaned than delivered his lines. And the people laughed.

The cruelty of the public heart angered Eldon and he

made further experiment in dolor. Laughs came now that he had not secured the night before. The others were bigger than then. He threw into some of his lines such subcellar misery that he broke up Sheila. When he made the laughing exit he did not even chuckle, he moaned. And the result was a tornado. People mopped their eyes.

Batterson met him with a quizzical smile: "You got 'em going to-night nearly as good as the time your lantern went out."

That was higher praise than it sounded at first hearing.

When Mrs. Vining made her exit she said, "Aha! What did I tell you, young man?"

When Sheila came off she sought him out, and cried, "Oh, you were wonderful, simply wonderful!"

And when Batterson growled at her: "You spoiled several of his best laughs by talking through 'em. You ought to know better than that," Sheila was so pleased for Eldon's sake that she relished the rebuke.

Mrs. Vining had warned him to nail his laughs. At the next performance he tried to repeat his exact effects. Some of them he forgot, some of them he remembered. But they did not work this time. Others went better than ever. Each point was a new battle.

And so it was with every repetition. No two audiences were alike. Each had its own individuality. He began to study audiences as individuals. The first part of his first act was his period of getting acquainted. Some houses were quick and some slow, some noisily demonstrative, some quietly satisfied. It took all his powers to play his part. And he could not tire of it because every night was a first night in a new rôle.

Success made another man of him. He was interested in his task. He was winning praise for it. The management voluntarily raised his salary a little. He held his head a trifle higher.

Sheila noted the change at once. She liked him the better for it. She repeated her invitation to tea. He accepted now, and appeared in some new clothes. They were vastly becoming. On the stage he played a middle-aged henpecked plebeian. Off the stage he was young and handsome and thoroughbred.

He was a reader, too, and Sheila, like most actresses, was an omnivorous browser. They talked books. She lent him one of hers. He cherished it as if it were a breviary. They argued over literature and life. He ventured to contradict her. He was no longer a big mastiff at heel. He was forceful and stubborn. These qualities do not greatly displease a woman who likes a man.

Mrs. Vining was amused at first by the change in Sheila. Latterly the girl was constantly quoting "Mr. Eldon." By and by it was "As Floyd Eldon says," and one day Mrs. Vining heard, "Last night Floyd was telling me." Then Aunt John grew alarmed, for she did not want Sheila to be in love—not for a long while yet, and never with an actor.

And Sheila had no intention of falling in love with an actor. But this did not prevent her from being the best of friends with one. All of Eldon's qualities charmed Sheila as she discovered them. She had leisure for the discovery. There were no rehearsals; business was good at the theater; Eldon grew better and better in his performance. Sheila kept up her pace and enlarged her following. They dwelt in an atmosphere of contentment. But as her personal public increased and as the demands on her spirits and her time increased she began to take more pleasure in the company of Eldon and to like him best alone. She began to break old engagements, or fulfil them briefly, and to refuse new invitations.

Mrs. Vining was not able to be about for a while. Her neuralgia was revived by the knife-winds of Chicago. But Sheila and Eldon found them highly stimulating. He joined her in her constitutionals.

Chicago was large enough to give them a kind of seclusion by multitude, the solitude of a great forest. Among Chicago's myriads the little "Friend in Need" company was lost to view. It was possible to go about with Eldon and never meet a fellow-trooper; to walk miles with him along the Lake front, or through Lincoln Park, to sidle past the pictures in the Art Institute or the Field Museum, and rest upon the benches in galleries where the dumb beauty on the walls warmed the soul to sensitiveness.

And when they were not alone their hearts seemed to commune without exchange of word or glance. He told her first how wonderful an artist she was, and by and by he was crediting her art to her wonderful "personality." She told him that he had "personality," too, lots of it, and charming. She told him that the stage needed men of birth and breeding and higher education, especially when these were combined with such—such—she could hardly say beauty—so she fell back again on that useful term—"personality."

They never tired of discussing the technic of their trade and its emotional grandeurs. He told her that his main ambition was to see her achieve the heights God meant her for; he only wished that he might trudge on after her, in her wake. She told him that he had far greater gifts than she had, and that his future was boundless.

Finally she convinced him that she was convinced of this, and over a tea-table in the Auditorium Hotel he murmured—and trembled with the terrific audacity of it as he murmured:

"If only we could always play together—twin stars."

She was shocked as if she had touched a live wire of frightful beatitude. And her lips shivered as she mumbled, "Would you like that?"

He could only sigh enormously. And his eyes were full of devout longing as he whispered, "Let's!"

They burst into laughter like children planning some tremendous game. And then Mrs. Vining had to walk into their cloud-Eden and dissolve it into a plain table at which she seated herself.

Mrs. Vining was thinking "Aha!" as she crossed the room to their table. "It's high time I was getting well. Affairs have been progressing since I began to nurse my neuralgia."

She resolved to stick around, like the "demon chaperon" of Fontaine Fox's comic pictures. At all costs she must rescue Sheila from the wiles of this good-looking young man. For her ward to lose her head and find her heart in an affair with an actor would be a disaster indeed; the very disaster that Sheila's mother had warned her against.

Of course Sheila's mother had married an actor and been as happy as a woman had a right to expect to be with any man. And of course Mrs. Vining's own dear dead John Vining had been the most lovable of rascals. But such bits of luck could not keep on recurring in the same family.

And Mr. Reben did not believe in marriage for actors, either. He had many reasons far from romantic. The public did not like its innocent heroines to be wives. The prima donna's husband is a proverb of trouble-making. Separated, the couple pine; united, they quarrel with other members of the company or with each other. Children arrive contrary to bookings and play havoc with youth and vivacity, changing the frivolous Juliet into a Nurse or a Roman Matron.

Reben would have been infuriated to learn that Sheila Kemble, his Sheila of the golden future, was dallying on the brink of an infatuation for an infatuated minor member of one of his companies. A flirtation, even, was too dangerous to permit. He would have dismissed Eldon without a moment's pity if he had known what none of the company had yet suspected. Unwittingly he accom-

plished the effect he would have sought if he had been aware.

Reben ran out to Chicago ostensibly, according to his custom, to inspect the troupe in the last fortnight of its run there. He invited Sheila to supper with Mrs. Vining. He criticized Sheila severely and praised Miss Griffen. Later, as if quite casually, he spoke to Mrs. Vining of a new play he had found abroad. It was a man star's play. "I bought it for Tom Brereton," he said, "but the leadin' woman's rôle is rather interestin'."

He described one of her scenes and noted that Sheila was instantly excited. It was one of those craftsmanly achievements the English dramatists arrive at oftener than ours, and it had made the instant fame of the actress who played it in London. Having dropped this golden apple before Atalanta, he changed the subject carelessly.

Sheila turned back to the apple:

"Tell me more about the play, please!"

Reben told her more, permitted her to coax him to tell it all. He yawned so crudely that she would have noticed his wiles if she had been able to think of anything but that rôle; for an actress thrills at the thought of putting on one of these costumes of the soul as quickly as an average woman grows incandescent before a new gown.

Sheila clasped her hands and shook her head like a beggar outside a restaurant window: "Oh, but I envy the woman who plays that part! Who is she?"

"Parton, I suppose," Reben yawned. "But she's fallen off lately. Gone and got herself in love—and with a fool actor, of all people! The idiot! I've a notion to chuck her. After all the money and publicity I've wasted on her, to fall for a dub like that!"

Sheila did not dare plead for the part. But her eyes prayed; her very attitude implored it.

Reben laughed: "In case anything awful happened to Parton—like sudden death or matrimony—I don't suppose the rôle would interest you?"

"I'd give ten years off my life to play that part."

"Would you, now?" Reben laughed. "You don't mean it. Ten years off your life, eh? Would you give ten dollars off your salary?" He chuckled at his shrewdness.

But she answered, solemnly, "I'd play it for nothing."

"Well, well!" said Reben. "That would be a savin'!" He always would have his little joke. Then he said: "But jokin' aside, of course I couldn't afford to let you work for nothin'. Fact is, if the play was a success I could afford to pay you a little better than you're gettin' now. What are you gettin' now?"

"Seventy-five," said Sheila.

"Is that all!" said Reben. "Well, well, I don't have to be as stingy as that. But there's one thing I can't afford to do and that's to work for an actor—or actress—who quits me as soon as I make him—or her."

"I'd never quit you if you gave me chances like that," Sheila sighed, hopelessly.

"So they all tell me," said Reben. "Then they chuck me for the management of Cupid & Co. Would you be willin' to sign a five years' contract with me, young lady?"

"In a minute!"

"Well, well! I'll see what can be done. Good night!"

He left her to fret herself to an edge with the insomnia of frantic ambition. The next day he sent her a contract to look over.

"Aha!" said Sheila to Mrs. Vining. "That's his little game. He wanted me all the time. Why couldn't he have said so? I'll make him pay for being so clever."

She sent the contract back with emendations.

He emended her emendations and returned it to her.

She emended further and wrote in the margin, "Oh, Mr. Reben!" and, "Greedy, greedy!"

He rather enjoyed the duel with the little haggler. He belonged to the race that best manages to combine really good art with really good business and really good generosity.

When at last he had bargained Sheila to the wall he made her a present of better terms than she had accepted—as if he were tossing her a handsome diamond.

Sheila embraced him and called him an angel. He belonged, indeed, to the same race as the only original angels.

She signed the contract with exclamations of gratitude. With his copy in his pocket he put out both hands and wished her all the glory he planned for her. Then he told her to get ready to leave within a week for New York and rehearsals.

He had brought to Chicago a young woman stage-named Dulcie Ormerod to replace her. He wanted Dulcie to play the part at least a week so that the company could be advertised as "exactly the same that appeared in Chicago."

When he had gone Sheila fell from the clouds—at least she struck a hole in the air and sank suddenly nearer to the earth. She cried, "Oh, Aunt John, I forgot to ask if he wanted you in the new play!"

"No, he doesn't, dearie. He told me how sorry he was that there was no part for me while you were signing the contract."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I won't leave you!"

"Of course you will, my child. You can't go on forever chained to my old slow heels. Besides, I'm too tired to learn a new part this season. I'll jog on out to the Coast with this company. I think California will be good for me."

A little later Sheila remembered Floyd Eldon. She gasped as if she had been stabbed.

"Why, what's wrong now, honey?" cried Mrs. Vining.

"I was just thinking— Oh, nothing!"

Sheila was dismayed at the idea of leaving Eldon, leaving him all by himself—no, not by himself, for that Dulcie creature would replace her in the company, and

perhaps—no doubt—in his lonely heart. Sheila had grown ever so fond of Eldon, but she could not expect any man, least of all so handsome, so big-hearted a man, to resist the wiles of a cat, or, worse, a kitten, who would select such a name as "Dulcie."

An inspiration gave Sheila sudden cheer. She would ask dear Mr. Reben to give Eldon a chance in the new company. It would be far better for Floyd to "create" something than to continue hammering at his present second-hand rôle. He might have to take a smallish part, but they would be in each other's neighborhood, and perhaps the star might fall ill. Eldon would step in; he would make an enormous sensation; and then and thus in a few short months they would have accomplished their dream—they would be revolving as twin stars in the high sky together.

She called up Reben at the theater; he had gone to the hotel. At the hotel, he had left for the station. At the station, he had taken the train. Well, she would write to him or, better yet, see him in person and arrange it the minute she reached New York.

That night she took her contract to the theater in her hand-bag. She must tell Floyd about it.

He was loitering outside when she reached the stage door. Her face was agleam with joy as she beckoned him under a light in the corridor. His face was agleam, too, as he hurried forward. Before she could whisk out her contract he brandished before her one of his own. Before she could say, "See what I have!" he was murmuring: "Sheila! Sheila! What do you suppose? Reben—the great Reben likes my work. He said he thought I was worth keeping, but I ought to be playing the juvenile lead instead of a second old man. He's going to shift Eric Folwell to a new production East, and he offered me his place! Think of it! Of course I grabbed it. I'm to replace Folwell as soon as I can get up in the part. Would you believe it—Reben gave me a contract for three years.

He's boosted me to fifty a week already. I'm to play this part all season through to the Coast. And next season he'll give me a better part in something else—and at a better salary.

"I wanted to telephone you about it, but I was afraid to mention it to you for fear something might prevent him from signing. But he did!—just before he took the train. See, there's his own great name! After next week I'm to be your lover in the play as well as in reality. Our dream is coming true already, isn't it—" He hesitated before the absolute word, then, having made the plunge, went on and whispered, "Sheila mine!"

Sheila stared at him, at the love and triumph in his eyes; and suddenly her cake was dough. Her mouth twisted like a child's when the rain begins on a holiday. She turned her head away and passed the side of her hand childishly across her clenched eyes, whence the tears came thronging. She half murmured, half wept:

"I'm not your Sheila. I'm that hateful old Reben's slave. And I don't go any further with you. Miss—Dulcie Somebody-or-other is to have my part. She's prettier than I am. And I've got to go to New York next week to begin rehearsals of—a horrid old B-british success."

The voice of the call-boy warning them of the half-hour sent them scurrying to their cells with their plight unsolved. They had a few chances to exchange regrets during the performance, but other members of the company who had heard of the good luck of both of them kept breaking in with felicitations that sounded like irony. They were so desperate for talk that Eldon waited for Sheila in the alley and walked to her hotel with her. Mrs. Vining went along, very much along. They had to accept her presence; she would not be ignored. She put in sarcastic allusions to the uselessness of good luck in this world. In her day actors and actresses would have

been dancing along the streets over such double fortune. As to their separation, it would be a good test of their alleged affection. If it was serious it would outlast the test; if not, it was a good time to learn how unimportant the whole thing was.

She regarded the elegies of young love with all the skepticism of the old who have seen so much of it, heard so much repetition of such words as "undying" and "forever," and have seen the "undying" dying all about like autumn leaves, and few of the "forevers" lasting a year.

Sheila accepted Eldon's invitation to have a bite of supper in the grill-room. Mrs. Vining was in a grill-room mood and invited herself along. Other members of the troupe appeared and visited the funeral table with words of envy.

In the spaces between these interruptions Sheila explained her plan to ask Reben to give Eldon a chance with the new company.

Mrs. Vining sniffed: "Sheila, you ought to have sense enough to know that the minute you mentioned this young man's name Reben would send him to Australia—or fire him."

"Fire him?" said Sheila. "He has a three years' contract."

"Yes, with a two weeks' clause in it, I'll bet."

They fetched the contract out and looked it over again. There was the iniquitous clause, seated like a toad overlooked among the flowers, and now it was impossible to see the flowers for the toad.

"Oh, you ought to have changed that," said Sheila. "It's different in mine."

"I didn't know," said Eldon, "and I shouldn't have dared to argue with Reben. I was afraid he might change his mind. But I could resign and come East and get a job with another manager."

Mrs. Vining poured on more vinegar: "You can't resign. That two weeks' notice works only one way.

And if you break with Reben you'll have a fine chance getting in with any other manager! Besides, why let your—well, call it 'love' if you want to—why let it make fools of you both? Mr. Eldon has had a great compliment from the best manager in the country, and a raise of salary, and a promise of his interest. Are you thinking of slapping him in the face and kicking your own feet out from under yourself just because this foolish little girl is going along about her business?

"And another thing, Mr. Floyd Eldon, if you love this girl as much as you say you're taking a pretty way to prove it. Do you want to ruin her career just as it's beginning, drag this rising star back to the drudgery of being the wife of a fifty-dollar-a-week actor? Oh, you'll do better. You're the type that matinée girls make a pet of. You'll have draught, too, as soon as you learn a little more about your business. But it wouldn't help you any just now to be known as an old married man. You mind your business and let her mind hers.

"You think you're Romeo and Juliet in modern costume, I suppose. Well, look what a mess they made of it. You are two fine young things and I love you both, but you mustn't try to prove your devotion to each other by committing suicide together."

Eldon's thoughts were dark and bitter. His own career meant nothing to him at the moment. His love of Sheila was all-important to him, and her career was, above all, important. He said: "I certainly won't do anything to hurt Sheila's career. That's my religion—her career."

He poured into her eyes all the idolatry a man can feel for a woman. He had a curious feeling that he read in her eyes a faint fleck of disappointment. His sacrifice was perfect and complete, but he felt an odious little suspicion that it was not absolutely welcome.

Perhaps he guessed right. Sheila was hastening to that point in womanhood where the chief demand of her soul is not that her lover should exalt her on a pedestal and wor-

ship her, but should tear her thence and love her. She did not suspect this yet herself. All she knew was that she was dissatisfied with her triumph. She bade Eldon a ghostly farewell at the hotel elevator and went up to her room, while he turned away to his dingy boarding-house. He had not yet bettered his lodgings; he was trying to save his pennies against the future need of a married man.

When Sheila had made ready for bed she put out the lights and leaned across the sill and stared across the dark boundless prairie of the starlit Lake. It had an oceanic vastitude and loneliness. It was as blank as her own future.

CHAPTER XVI

THE last days of Sheila's presence with the company were full of annoyances. There was little opportunity for communion with Floyd. Mrs. Vining was invincibly tenacious. All day long, too, Floyd was rehearsing his new rôle. This proved intensely difficult to him. With a heart full of devotion to Sheila, it was worse than awkward to be making love to the parvenue who took her place, mimicked her intonations, made the same steps and gestures, said the same words, and yet was so radically different.

She was a forward thing—Miss Dulcie Ormerod. She patronized Eldon and tried to flirt with him at the same time. She forced conversation on him when he was morose. She happened to meet him with extraordinary coincidence when he was outside the theater. And almost every time the two of them happened to be together they happened to meet Sheila.

Dulcie was one of those women who seem unable to address one without pawing or clinging—as if the arms were telephone cables, and there were no communicating without contact.

Sheila was of the wireless type. A touch from her was as important as a caress. To put a hand familiarly or carelessly on her arm was not to be thought of, at least by Eldon. Others who attempted it found that she flinched aside or moved to a distance almost unconsciously. She kept herself precious in every way.

Eldon loathed the touch of Dulcie's claws, especially as he could not seem to convince Sheila that he did not

enjoy her incessant contiguity. And the prehensive Dulcie was calling him "Floyd" before the third rehearsal.

Batterson was calling him all sorts of names of the familiarity that implies contempt, for Eldon was not rehearsing well. He realized the confusing inconveniences that love can weave into the actor's trade. If it had not been for Sheila he could have made a straight matter of art or business out of the love-scenes with Dulcie, or he could have thrown the hungry thing an occasional kind word to keep her quiet, or have fallen temporarily in love with her, for Dulcie was one of those actresses who insist that they "must feel a part to play it." She was forever alluding to one of her rôles in which "she knew she was great because she wept real tears in it."

Sheila belonged to the other school. Her father would say of a scene, "I knew I was great in that because I could guy it." For then he was like the juggler who can chat with the audience without dropping a prop—a Cyrano who can fight for his life and compose a poem at the same time.

Sheila felt the emotions of her rôle when she first took it up, but she conquered them as soon as she could by studying and registering their manifestations, so that her resources were like an instrument to play on. Thereafter her emotions were those of the concert violinist who plays upon his audience as well as his instrument.

Sheila watched a few rehearsals. She hated the exaggerated sentimentalisms of Dulcie and her splay-footed comedy. Dulcie underscored every important word like a school-girl writing a letter. Sheila credited the audience with a sense of humor and kept its intelligence alert. Sheila made no bones of criticizing her successor. But when Eldon agreed with her, she was not convinced. She was far more jealous of him than she was of her rôle. But Eldon was not wise enough to take comfort from these proofs of her affection. They narrowly escaped quarreling during their last few meetings.

When Sheila went away Eldon could not even go to the train with her. Batterson held him to rehearsal.

Sheila said, "Don't worry; Mr. Folwell will take care of me." She could hardly have been ignorant of the torment this meant to Eldon, but her heart was aching, too, because he permitted a little thing like his business to keep him from paying the last tributes of tenderness.

Folwell was one of those affable leading men who always proffer their leading women as much gallantry as they care to accept. He had been a devoted suitor to Zelma Griffen and had graciously pretended to suffer agonies of jealousy over her humming-bird flirtations. He had done the same with the women stars of his last three engagements. He was Scotch, and had a gift of sad-eyed sincerity for the moment, and a vocabulary of irresistible little pet names, and a grim earnestness about whatever interested him at the time. His real name was, curiously, Robert Burns. He had changed it lest he be suspected of stealing it, or of advertising a much-advertised tobacco.

Eldon imagined that Folwell would begin to languish over Sheila the moment the train started, and was tempted to bash in his head so that he would be incapable of making love at all. He had won into Sheila's good graces by knocking an anonymous student over the footlights. If he sent a pseudonymous actor the same way he might clinch his success with her. He little knew that the blow he had struck Bret Winfield had not yet ceased to sting that youth, and that Winfield was still repeating his vow to square himself with Eldon and with Sheila—in very different ways.

But Eldon let Folwell escape without planting his fists on him. And he let Sheila escape without imprinting the seal of his kiss upon her. He had never laid lip to her cheek. And now they were divorced, without being betrothed.

If he had known how tenderly Sheila's thoughts flew

back to him, if he had known that she locked herself in her state-room and wept and never once saw Folwell on the train, he would have been happier and sadder both, with the incurable perversity of a forlorn lover. If he could have seen her very soul of souls he would have seen what she dared not admit to herself, that she was a little disappointed in him because he let her go. She doubted the greatness of his love of her because he loved the artist she was so well. Sheila was more jealous of her actress self than of Dulcie Ormerod.

It was not many days before Eldon, too, turned his back on Chicago, but facing westerly. The city was dear to him: he had passed through a whole lifetime of stages there, from crushing failure to success in a leading rôle, and from loneliness to reciprocated love and widowerhood.

Mrs. Vining tried to console him when he turned to her as at least a relative of Sheila's. She made as much as she could of his performance as Folwell's successor. It was a creditable and a promising beginning, though it offended her experienced standards in countless ways. But she flattered him with honeyed words, and she tried to wear away his love for Sheila.

She had seen so many nice young fellows and dear, sweet girls stretched on the rack of these situations—wrenched by the wheels of separation and all the suspicions that jealousy can imagine from opportunity. In all mercy she wished this couple well cured of the inflammation. She did her part to allay it with counter-irritants and caustics. She wrote Sheila that Eldon was getting along famously with his rôle—and with Dulcie, who was "a dear little thing and winning excellent press notices." She told Eldon that Sheila was in love with her new play, and that Tom Brereton was turning her head with his compliments. Folwell, who had the second male rôle in the new play, was also very attentive, she said. And Sheila was going out a good deal in New York

—dancing her feet off nearly every night. The author of the play was a third rival for her favor, in Mrs. Vining's chronicles.

Everything collaborated to Eldon's torture. The "Friend in Need" company was moving West in long jumps. Sheila's letters had farther and farther to go. A sudden change of booking threw them off the track and two weeks passed without a line. He sent her day letters and night letters as affectionate in tone as he had the face to submit to the telegraph operators. Her answers did not satisfy him. They were never so prompt as his calculations and he did not credit her with restraint before the cold-eyed telegraphers.

She was far busier, too, than he imagined. Costumes were to be ordered and fitted; the new lines to be learned; photographs to be posed for; interviews to be given. Reben was grooming her for a star already, without giving her an inkling of his schemes. As for flirting with Brereton or Folwell, she was as far as possible from the thought of such a leisurely occupation. She was having battles with them, and still bitterer conflicts with the author.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the eyes of the playwright Sir Ralph Incledon, as in the eyes of the early Spaniards, the Americans were savages with unlimited gold to exchange for glass beads. He had a noble contempt for all of us except our dollars, and he was almost ashamed to take those; their very nomenclature was vulgar and the decimal system was French.

The London success of his piece following upon his arrival at knighthood had completely spoiled him. Other great writers and actors who had received the accolade had been rendered a little meeker and more knightly as knights, but Incledon became almost unendurably offensive, even to his fellows in London. The decent English in New York who had to meet him abominated him as civilized Americans abroad abominate the noisy specimens of Yankee insolence who go twanging their illiterate contempt through the palaces and galleries and restaurants of Europe.

Sir Ralph was greatly distressed with the company Reben had proudly mustered for him. Tom Brereton was English born and bred, but Sir Ralph accused him of "an extraord'n'r'ly atrowcious Amayric'n acs'nt." Americans who had seen the London performance had been amazed not only at the success of Miss Berkshire, but at her very tolerance on the stage; they said she looked like a giraffe and talked like a cow. But she pleased her own public somehow. When Sir Ralph saw Sheila he was not impressed; he said that she was "even wahss" than Brereton and under "absolutely neigh-o sec'mst'nces could he per-

mit hah to deviate from the p'fawm'nce of d'yah aold Bahkshah."

Sheila had flattered herself that she knew something of England and English; she had visited the island enough, and some of its stateliest homes; and she had had some of the worst young peers making love to her. But Sir Ralph, she wrote her aunt, evidently regarded her "as something between a squaw and a pork-packer's daughter."

Sir Ralph threw her into such a bog of humiliation that she floundered at every step. How could she give an intelligent reading to a line when he wanted every word sung according to the idiom of another woman of another race? How could she embody a rôle in its entirety when every utterance and motion was to be patterned on Sir Ralph's wretched imitations of a woman she had never seen?

Sir Ralph not only threw his company into a panic, but he revealed a positive genius for offending the reporters, the critics, the public. Before the first curtain rose there was a feeling of hostility, against which the disaffected and disorganized players struggled in vain.

His play was a beautiful structure, full of beautiful thoughts expertly wrought into form. But Sir Ralph, like so many authors, seemed to contradict in his person everything worth while in his work.

His wife, Lady Incledon, knew him to be earnest, hard-working, emotional, timorous. His anxiety and modesty when at bay before the public gave the impression of conceit, contempt, and insolence. If he had been more cocksure of his play he would not have been so critical of its interpreters. If he had not been so afraid of the Americans he would not have tried to make them afraid of him. No tenderer-hearted novelist ever wrote than Dickens, yet he had the knack of infuriating mobs of people into a warm desire to lynch him. No sweeter-souled poet ever sang than Keats, yet Byron said he never saw him but he wanted to kick him.

Sir Ralph Incledon had the misfortune to belong to this class. He was not popular at home and he was maddening abroad. He made Americans remember Bunker Hill and long to avenge Nathan Hale. The critics felt it their patriotic duty to make reprisals for all the Americans who had failed in London and to send this Piccadillian back with his coat-tails between his legs.

The opening performance in New York was a first-class disaster. The audience did not follow the London custom of calling the author out and booing him. It left him in the wings, excruciated with ingrowing speech. He had drawn up one of the most tactless orations ever prepared in advance by a well-meaning author. He was not permitted to deliver it. He had a cablegram written out to send his anxious wife overseas. He did not send it. When he read the next morning's papers he was simply dazed. He had come as a missionary direct from the capital to a benighted province and he was received with jeers—or "jahs," as his dialect would be spelled in our dialect.

He wept privately and then put on an armor of contempt. He sailed shortly after, leaving the Americans marooned on their desert continent.

The actors were treated with little mercy by most of the critics, except to be used as bludgeons to whack the author with. Sheila's notices were of the "however" sort. "Miss Sheila Kemble is a promising young actress; the part she played, however, was so irritating—" or, "In spite of all the cleverness of—" or, "Sheila Kemble exhausted her resources in vain to give a semblance of life to—"

Sheila sent the clippings to Mrs. Vining, and added: "Every bouquet had a brickbat in it. We are not long for this world, I fear."

Reben fought valiantly for the play. He squandered money on extra spaces in the papers and on the billboards. He quoted from the critics who praise every-

thing and he emphasized lines about the scenery. The play simply did not endure the sea change. People who came would not enjoy it, and would not recommend it. It was hard even to give away complimentary seats, and the result was one that would have been more amazing if it were less common; a successful play by a famous author produced with a famous cast at a leading theater in the largest city of the New World was played to a theater that could not be filled at any or no price. The receipts fell to forty dollars one night.

A newspaper wit wrote, "Last night the crowds on Broadway were so dense that a man was accidentally pushed into the Odeon Theater." On another day he said, "Last night during a performance of Sir Ralph Incledon's masterpiece some miscreant entered the Odeon Theater and stole all the orchestra chairs."

The slow death of a play is a miserable process. The actors began to see the nobilities of the work once the author was removed from in front of it. They regretted its passing, but plays cannot live in a vacuum. Novels and paintings can wait patiently and calmly in suspended animation till their understanders grow up, but plays, like infants, must be nourished at once or they die and stay dead.

Sheila and all the company had fought valiantly for the drama. Once Sir Ralph's back was turned, they fell to playing their rôles their own way, and they at least enjoyed their work more. But the audiences never came.

Sheila was plunged into deeps of gloom. She felt that she must suffer part of the blame or at least the punishment of the play's non-success. She wished she had stayed with "A Friend in Need."

But Reben had always been known as a good sport, a plucky taker of whatever medicine the public gave him. After a bastinado from the critics he had waited to see what the people would do. There was never any tell-

ing. Sometimes the critics would write pæans of rapture and the lobby would be as deserted as a graveyard, leaving the box-office man nothing to do but manicure his nails. Sometimes the critics would unanimously condemn, and there would be a queue at the door the next morning. Sometimes the critics would praise and the mob would storm the window. Sometimes they would blame and audiences would stay away as if by conspiracy. In any case, "the box-office tells the story."

Cassard, the manager, once said that he could tell if a play were a success by merely passing the theater an hour after the performance was over. A more certain test at the Odeon Theater was the manner of Mr. Chittick, the box-office man. If he laid aside his nail-file without a sigh and proved patient and gracious with the autobiographical woman who loitered over a choice of seats and their date, the play was a failure. If Mr. Chittick insulted the brisk business man who pushed the exact sum of money over the ledge and weakly requested "the two best, please" the play was a triumph. Mr. Chittick was a very model of affability while Incledon's play occupied the stage of the unoccupied theater.

Reben's motto was "The critics can make or break the first three weeks of a play and no more. After that they are forgotten." If he saw the business growing by so much as five dollars a night he hung on. But the Incledon play sagged steadily. At the end of a week Reben had the company rehearsing another play called "Your Uncle Dudley," an old manuscript he had bought years ago to please a star he quarreled with later.

Reben talked big for a while about forcing the run; then he talked smaller and smaller with the receipts. Finally he announced that "owing to previous bookings it will be necessary," etc. "Mr. Reben is looking for another theater to which to transfer this masterwork of Sir Ralph Incledon. He may take it to Boston, then to Chicago for an all-summer run."

Eventually he took it to Mr. Cain's storage warehouse. "Your Uncle Dudley," appealed to Reben as a stop-gap. It would cost little. The cast was small; only one set was required. The title rôle fitted Brereton to a nicety. He offered Sheila the heroine, who was a "straight." She cannily chose a smaller part that had "character." The play was flung on "cold"—that is, without an out-of-town try-out.

It caught the public at "the psychological moment," to use a denatured French expression. The morning after the first night the telephone drove Mr. Chittick frantic. He almost snapped the head off a dear old lady who wanted to buy two boxes. It was a hopeless success.

The only sour face about the place except his was the star's. The critics accused Tom Brereton of giving "a creditable performance." All the raptures were for Sheila. She was lauded as the discovery of the year.

The critics are always "discovering" people, as Columbus discovered the Indians, who had been there a long while before. Two critics told Reben in the lobby between the acts that there was star-stuff in Sheila. He thanked them both for giving him a novel idea: "I never thought of that, old man." And the old men walked away like praised children. Like children, they were very, very innocent when they were good and very, very incorrigible when they were horrid.

Tom Brereton behaved badly, to Sheila's thinking. To his thinking she was the evil spirit. He gave one of those examples of good business policy which is called "professional jealousy" in the theater. He did what any manufacturer does who resists the substitution of a "just as good" for his own widely advertised ware. Tom Brereton was the star of the piece according to his contracts and his prestige. He had toiled lifelong to attain his height and he was old enough and wise enough to realize that he must maintain himself stubbornly or new ambitions would crowd him from his private peak.

Sheila had youth, femininity, and beauty, none of which qualities were Brereton's. The critics and the public acclaimed the comet and neglected the planet. Reben's press agent, Starr Coleman, flooded the press with Sheila's photographs and omitted Brereton's, partly because the papers will always give more space to a pretty woman than a plain man, and would rather publish the likeness of a rear-row chorus girl than of the eccentric comedian who heads the cast.

Coleman arranged interviews with Sheila, wrote them and gave them to dramatic editors and the gush-girls of the press. Coleman compiled what he called the "Sheila Kemble cocktail" and demanded it at the bars to which he led the arid newspaper men. He did not object to the recipe being mentioned.

Sheila won the audiences, and if Brereton omitted her at a curtain call the audience kept on applauding stubbornly till he was forced to lead her out. She was always waiting. She was greedy for points, and kept building her scenes, encroaching little by little.

Brereton sulked awhile, then protested formally to the stage-manager, who gave him little sympathy. Eventually Brereton tried to repress Sheila's usurpations.

Little unpleasantnesses developed into open wrangles. It was purely a business rivalry, and Sheila had no right to expect gallantry in a field where she condescended to put herself on an equality with men. But she expected it, none the less. The labor-unions show the same jealousy of women when they trespass on their profits in the mills or the coal-mines.

Sheila began to hate Brereton with a young woman's vivacity and frankness, and to torment him mischievously. In one scene he had to embrace her with fervor. She used to fill her belt with pins and watch him wince as he smiled. He retaliated with as much dignity as he could muster. He could not always muster much. His heart was full of rage.

He visited Reben in his office and demanded his rights or his release. Reben tried to appease him; business was too good to be tampered with. Reben promised him complete relief—next season. Then he would put somebody else in Sheila's place.

He could afford to be gracious because he felt that the hour had come to launch Sheila as a star. Her success in a character rôle of peculiarly American traits led him to abandon hope of finding a foreign success to float her in. Besides, he had lost so much money on Incledon's London triumph that he was an intense partisan for the native drama—till the next American play should fail, and the next importation succeed.

One evening, during the second *entr'acte*, he led a tall and scholarly-looking young man down the side aisle and back of a box to the stage. He left the uneasy alien to dodge the sections of scenery that went scudding about like sails without hulls. Then he went to dressing-room "No. 2" and tapped.

Old Pennock's glum face appeared at the door with a threatening, "We-ell?"

The intruder spoke meekly. "It's Mr. Reben."

Pennock repeated, "We-ell?"

Reben shifted to his other foot and pleaded, "May I speak to Miss Kemble a moment?"

Pennock closed the door. Later Sheila opened it a little and peered through, clutching together a light wrapper she had slipped into.

"Oh, hello!" she cried. "I'm sorry I can't ask you in. I've got a quick change, you know."

Even the manager must yield to such conditions and Reben spoke around the casement. "I've been thinking," he said, "that since you are so unhappy in this company you'd better have one of your own."

"For Heaven's sake!" Sheila gasped at this unexpected bouquet.

Reben went on: "Since we had such bad success with the masterpiece of the foremost English dramatist, perhaps you might have good luck by going to the other extreme. I've found the youngest playwright in captivity. Nowadays these kindergarten college boys write a lot of successes. Joking aside, the boy has a manuscript I'd like you to look over. There is a germ of something in it, I think. Will you just say Hello to him, please?"

Sheila consented with eagerness. Reben beckoned forward a long effigy of youthful terror.

"Miss Kemble, let me present Mr. Eugene Vickery."

"How do you do, Mr. Nickerson?" said Sheila, and thrust one bare arm through the chink to give her hand to Vickery. The arm was all he could see of her except a narrow longitudinal section of silhouette against the light over her mirror.

Vickery was so hurt, and so unreasonably hurt, by her failure to recall him who had cherished her remembrance all these years, that his surprise escaped him: "I met you once before, but you don't remember me."

She lied politely, and squeezed the hand she felt around hers with a prevaricating cordiality. "Indeed I do. Let me see, where was it we met—in Chicago, wasn't it, this fall?"

"No; it was in Braywood."

"Braywood? But I've never been in Braywood, have I? Mr. Reben, have I ever played Bray— Oh, that's where my aunt and uncle live! But was I ever there?"

"Very long ago."

"Oh, don't say that! Not before my manager!"

"As a very little girl."

"Oh, that's better. You see, I go to so many places. And that's where I met you? You've changed, haven't you?"

She could see nothing of him except the large, lean hand that still clung to hers. She got it back as he laughed:

"Yes, I've grown some taller. I played Hamlet to your

Ophelia. Then I wrote a play for you, but you got away without hearing it. Now I've written another for you. You can't escape this time."

"I won't try to. I'm just dying to play it. What is it?"

A voice spoke in sternly: "Curtain's going up. You ready, Miss Kemble?"

"Good Lord! Yes!" Then to Vickery. "I've got to fly. When can I see you, Mr. Bickerton?"

Reben solved the problem: "Got an engagement to supper?"

"Yes, but I'll break it."

"We'll call for you."

"Fine! Good-by, Mr.—Mr. Braywood!"

The door closed and Vickery turned away in such a whirl of elation that he almost walked into the scene where Tom Brereton was giving an unusually creditable performance, since Sheila was off the stage.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT must be a strangely thrilling thing to be a woman and meet a man who has been so impressed by oneself in childhood that he has never forgotten—a man who has indeed devoted his gifts and ambitions to the perfection of a drama to exploit one's charms and one's gifts, and comes back years after with the extraordinary tribute.

The idol needs the idolater or it is no idol, and it doubtless watches the worshiper with as much respect and trepidation as the worshiper it. That is why gods, like other artists, have always been jealous. Their trade lies in their power to attract crowds and hold them. Rivals for glory are rivals for business.

Vickery was Sheila's first playwright. She could not fail to regard him as a rescuer from mediocrity, and see a glamour about him.

She had planned to go to a late dance that night with some people of social altitude. But she would have snubbed the abbess of all aristocracy for a playwright who came offering her transportation to the clouds.

She had taken her best bib and tucker to her dressing-room and she put it on for Vickery. But she could not dredge up the faintest memory of him, and he found her almost utterly strange as he stared at her between the shaded candles on the restaurant table. She was different even from the girl he had seen on the stage recoiling from Bret Winfield's unlucky chivalry. The few months of intermission had altered her with theatrical speed. She had had her sentiments awakened by Eldon and her

authority enlarged by two important rôles. Her own character was a whole repertoire.

When Vickery had last seen her she was playing the second young woman under her aunt's protection; now she was a metropolitan favorite at whose side the big manager of the country sat as a sort of prime minister serving her royalty.

First came the necessary business of ordering a supper. Sheila's appetite amazed Vickery, who did not realize that this was her dinner, or how hard she had worked for it.

When the waiter had hurried off with a speed which he would not duplicate in returning, Sheila must hear about her first acquaintance with Vickery. He spoke with enthusiasm of the little witch she had been, and described with homage her fiery interpretation of Ophelia and her maniac shrieks. He could still hear them, he said, on quiet nights. He pictured her so vividly as she had sat on his mother's knee and defended her family name and profession that Sheila's eyes filled with tears and she turned to Reben for confirmation of her emotions. There are few children for whom we feel kindlier than for our early selves.

Her eyes glistened as Vickery recounted his own boyish ambitions to write her a play; the depths of woe he had felt when he found her gone. Then he described his retrieval of her during the riot at Leroy. He told how his friend Bret Winfield had been knocked galley-west by some actor in her troupe. He had forgotten the man's name, but his words brought Eldon back in the room and seated him like a forlorn and forgotten Banquo at the table. Sheila blushed to remember that she had owed the poor fellow a letter for a long time.

Then Vickery explained that Winfield had gone to her defense and not to her offense, and she felt a pang of remorse at her injustice to him, also. A pretty girl has to be unjust to so many men.

She had a queer thrill, too, from Vickery's statement

that Winfield had vowed to meet her some day and square himself with her; also to meet "that actor" some day and square himself with him.

This strange man Winfield began to loom across her horizon like an approaching Goliath. She tried to remember how he had looked, but recalled only that he was very big and that she was very much afraid of him.

This confusion of retrospect and prospect was dissipated, however, when Vickery began to talk of the play he had written for her. Then Sheila could see nothing but her opportunity, and that strange self an actor visualizes in a new rôle. The rest of us think of Hamlet as a certain personage. The actor thinks of "Hamlet as Myself" or "Myself as Hamlet."

Vickery's play, as Reben's play-reader had told him, contained an idea. But an idea is as dangerous to a playwright as a loaded gun is to a child. The problem is, What will he do with it?

When Vickery told Sheila the central character and theme of his play she was enraptured with the possibilities. When he began to describe in detail what he had done with them she was tormented with disappointments and resentments. She gave way to little gasps of, "Oh, would she do that?" "Oh, do you think you ought to have her say that?"

Vickery was young and opinionated and had never seen one of his plays after the critics and the public had made tatters of it. He could only realize that he had spent months of intense thought upon every word. He was shocked at Sheila's glib objections.

How could one who simply heard his story for the first time know what ought to be done with it? He forgot that a play's prosperity, like a joke's, lies in the ear of those who hear it for the first time.

He responded to Sheila's skepticisms with all the fanatic eloquence of faith. He convinced her against her will for the moment. She liked him for his ardor. She

liked the reasons he gave. She could not help feeling: "What a decent fellow he is! What a kind, wholesome view of life he takes!"

Woman-like, as she listened to his ideas she fell to studying his character and the features that published it. She was contrasting him with Eldon—Eldon so powerful, so handsome, so rich-voiced, so magnetic, and so obstinate; Vickery so homely, so lean, so shambling of gait and awkward of gesture, his voice so inadequate to the big emotions he had concocted. And yet Eldon only wanted to join her in the interpretation of other people's creations. This spindle-shanks was himself a creator; he had idealized and dramatized a play from and for Sheila's very own personality.

She began to think that there was something a trifle more exhilarating about an alliance with a creative genius than with just another actor. In her youth and ignorance she used the words "creative" and "genius" with reverence. She had never known a "creative genius" before —except Sir Ralph Incledon, and she loathed him. Vickery was different.

Suddenly in the midst of Vickery's description of the complexest tangle of his best situation Sheila dumfounded him by saying, "You have gray eyes, haven't you?"

He collapsed like a punctured balloon and a look of intense discouragement dulled his expression. Misunderstanding the cause of his collapse entirely, she hastened to add:

"Oh, but I like gray eyes! Really! Please go on!"

Vickery understood her misunderstanding, smiled laboriously, then with an effort gathered together the wreckage of his plot for a fresh ascension. Just as he was fairly well away from the ground again Sheila turned to Reben and spoke very earnestly:

"He ought to write a good play. He has the hands of a creative genius—those spatulate fingers, you know. See!"

Since she had known Vickery from childhood, she felt at liberty to stop his hand in the midst of an ardent gesture and submit it to Reben's inspection. Vickery was hugely embarrassed. Reben was gruff:

"If he's such a genius you'd better not hold his hand. Let him gene."

She stared at Reben in amazement; there was a clang of anger in his sarcasm. Abruptly she realized that she had quite ignored him. She had lent Vickery her eyes and ears for half an hour. Reben's anger was due to hurt pride, the miff of a great manager neglected by a minor actress and an unproduced author. But as she glanced up into the Oriental blackness of his glare she saw something lurking there that frightened her. Her instant intuition was, "Jealousy!" Slower-footed reason said, "Absurd!"

Reben had been closely attached for years to the exaltation of the famous actress, Mrs. Diana Rhys, who had floated to the stage on the crest of a famous scandal from a city where she had been known as Diana the Huntress. She had behaved rather better as an actress than as a housewife, but none too well in either calling. For some years she had been bound to Reben by ties that were supposed to be permanent.

Sheila reproached herself for imagining that Reben could be jealous of herself. Yet she cherished a superstitious belief that when she disregarded her intuition she went wrong. The superstition had fastened itself on her, as superstitions do, from her habit of remembering the occasional events that seemed to confirm it and forgetting the numberless events that disproved it.

She restored her attention to Vickery's plot, but the background of her thoughts was full of ominous lightnings and rumblings like a summer sky when a storm is far off but inevitable.

Now the plight of Vickery's heroine seemed much less thrilling than her own. Here she sat almost betrothed to

the distant Eldon, almost bewitched by the new-comer, Vickery, and threatened with the wrath of an unexpected claimant who was her manager and held both her present and her future in his hand.

She studied Reben out of the corner of her eye. This new, this utterly unsuspected phase of his, made necessary a fresh appraisal of him. He was now something more and something less than her manager. He was something of a conquest of hers; but did he hope to be a conqueror, too?

It was strange to think of him as a suitor—an amorous manager! a business man with a bouquet! In this guise he looked younger than she had seen him, yet more crafty, more cruel than ever. The Orientalism that had made him so shrewd a bargainer in the bazar was now in a harem humor. His black hair was, after all, in curls; his big eyes were shadowy, wet; his fat hands wore rings—a sanguine ruby twinned with a gross diamond and a shifty opal, like the back of an iridescent and venomous beetle.

Sheila thought of David and Solomon with their many loves, and she felt that perhaps Mrs. Rhys was not sufficient for this man. If he should claim her, too, what should she say to him? Must she sacrifice her career at its very outset just because this man turned monster?

She became so involved in her own meditations that Vickery found her almost deaf to his narrative. He lost the thread of his spinning and tangled himself in it like another Lady of Shalott.

Finally Sheila confessed her bewilderment. She spoke with an assumption of vast experience: "I never could tell anything from a scenario. The play is written out, isn't it?"

"Oh yes," said Vickery. "May I send it to your hotel?"

"I'd rather you'd read it to me," Sheila pleaded. "You could explain it, you know. I'm so stupid."

"That would be splendid!" said Vickery. "When? Where?"

Before Sheila could answer, Reben broke in, "At my office, at three to-morrow, if that suits you, Miss Kemble."

She demurred feebly that they would be interrupted all the time. Reben promised absolute peace and said, with a grim finality: "That's settled, then, Mr. Vickery. To-morrow, my office, three o'clock."

There was such a sharp dismissal in his tone that Vickery found himself standing with his hand out in farewell before he quite realized what had lifted him from his chair.

"You're not going?" said Sheila. "You haven't finished your coffee."

"I've had more than is good for me," said Vickery. "Good night, and thank you a thousand times. Good night, Mr. Reben."

As he shambled through the tables to the door Sheila said, "Nice boy."

"So you seem to think," Reben growled.

She stared at him again, troubled at his manner, confirmed in her suspicion, afraid of it and of him. But she said nothing.

"Want a liqueur?" he snapped.

She shook her head.

He said to her, "I'll take you home," and to the waiter, "Check!"

"Just put me in a cab," said Sheila.

He fumed with impatience over the waiter's delay with the check and the change, the time Sheila spent getting her wrap from the cloak-woman, and her gloves and her hand-bag. He tapped his foot with impatience while the starter whistled up a taxicab. Then he spoke to the driver and got in with her.

He said nothing but, "May I smoke?" But she noted his fearsome mien as the light of his match painted it with startling vividness against the dark. The ruby of his ring was like an evil eye. His thick brows drew down over the black fire of his own eyes, and his lips were red

over the big teeth that clenched the cigar. Then he puffed out the match and his face vanished. He said nothing till they reached the apartment-hotel where she lived. He helped her out and paid the driver. She put forth her hand to bid him good night, but he said:

"I want a word with you, please."

CHAPTER XIX

HE led the way into the lobby. She was intensely disturbed, but she could not find the courage to quarrel with him in the presence of the hall-boys. Those who had suites of rooms were permitted to receive guests in them. Reben was the first man that had come alone to Sheila's rooms, and she felt that the elevator-boy was trying to disguise his cynical excitement.

What could she say to him? how rebuke an unexpressed comment? She hoped that Pennock would be there or would come along speedily to save the situation. She was angry and discomfited as she unlocked her door, switched on the lights, and offered Reben a chair in her little parlor.

Sheila saw that Reben's eyes were eagerly searching the apartment for signs of a third person. She was tempted to go to Pennock's room and call some message to her imaginary presence. But she resented her own cowardice and her need of a duenna. She laid off her hat, seated herself with smiling hospitality, and waited for Reben to say his say.

He indicated his cigar with a querying lift of the eyebrows, and she nodded her consent.

Then the business man of him began at the beginning as if he had much to say in a short time and did not want to lose the momentum of his emotion:

"Sheila, you're a wonderful girl. If you weren't I shouldn't be taking you up from the army of actresses that are just as ambitious as you are. I'd be very blind

not to see what the whole public sees and not to feel what everybody feels.

"This cub Vickery felt your fascination when you were a child. He never forgot you. He's trying to put something of you into his play. That other fellow he told you about has made a vow to get to you. You have draught, and all that it means.

"But the brighter the light, the firmer its standard must be. The farther your lantern shines, the bigger and stronger and taller a lighthouse it needs. You know there's such a thing as hiding a light under a bushel.

"Now, I'm already as big a manager as you'll ever be a star. I can give you advantages nobody else can give you. I've given you some of them already. I can give you more. In fact, nobody else can give you any, for I've got you under a contract that makes it possible for me to keep anybody else from exploiting you. But I'm willing and anxious to do everything I can for you. The question is, what are you willing to do for me?"

Sheila knew what he meant, but she answered in a shy voice: "Why, I'll do all I can—of course. I'll work like a slave. I'll try to make you all the money I'm able to."

"Money? Bagh!" he sneered. "What's money to me? I love it—as a game, yes. But I don't mind losing it. You've known me to drop forty or fifty thousand at a throw and not whimper, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"You'll do all you can, you say. But will you? There's something in life besides money, Sheila. 'There's — there's—" He tried to say "love," but it was an impossible word to get out at once. Instead he groped for her hand and took it in his hot clench.

She drew her cold, slim fingers away with a petulant, girlish, "Don't!"

He sighed desperately and laughed with bitterness. "I knew you'd do nothing for me. You'd let me work for you, and make you famous and rich, and squander

fortunes on your glory, and you'd let me die of loneliness. You'd let me eat my heart out like a love-sick stage-door Johnny and you wouldn't care. But I tell you, Sheila, even a manager is a man, and I can't live on business alone. I've got to have some woman's companionship and tenderness and devotion."

Sheila could not refrain from suggesting, "I thought Mrs. Rhys—"

"Mrs. Rhys!" he snarled. "That worn-out, burned-out volcano? She's an old woman. I want youth and beauty and— Oh, I want you, Sheila."

"I—I'm sorry," she almost apologized, trying not to insult such ardor.

"Oh, I know I'm not young or handsome, but I'll surround you with youth. I'll buy that play of your friend Vickery's; I'll get the biggest man in the country to whip it into shape; I'll give it the finest production ever a play had; I'll make the critics swallow it; I'll buy the ones that are for sale, and I'll play on the vanity of the others. If it fails, I'll buy you another play and another till you hit the biggest success ever known. Then I'll name a theater after you. I'll produce you in London, get you commanded to court. I'll make you the greatest actress in the world. These young fellows may be pretty to play with, but what can they do for you except ruin your career and interfere with your ambition and make a toy of you? I can give you wealth and fame and—immortality! And all I ask you to give me is your—your"—now he said it—"your love."

"I—I'm sorry," Sheila mumbled.

"You mean you won't?" he roared.

"How can I?" she pleaded, still apologetic. "Love isn't a thing you can just take and give to anybody you please, is it? I thought it was something that—that takes you and gives you to anybody it pleases. Isn't that it? I don't know. I'm not sure I know what love is. But that's what I've always understood."

He grunted at the puerility of this, and said, brusquely, "Well, if you can't give me love, then give me—you."

"How do you mean—give you me?"

"Oh, you're no child, Sheila," he snarled. "Don't play the ingénue with me. You know what I mean."

Her voice grew years older as she answered, icily: "When you say I'm no child, it makes me think I understand what you mean. But I can't believe that I do."

"Why?"

"Well, you've known my father and mother so long and they like you so much, and—well—it doesn't seem possible that you would mean me any harm."

No amount of heroics could have shamed him like that. His eyes rolled like a cornered wolf's. He shut them, and with one deep breath seemed to absolve himself and purify his soul. He mumbled, "I—I want you to—to marry me, Sheila!"

Sheila seemed to breathe a less stifling air. She felt sorry for him now; but he asked a greater charity than she could grant. She answered: "Oh, I couldn't marry anybody; not now. I don't want to marry—at all." She sought for the least-insulting explanation. "It—it would hurt me professionally."

His self-esteem blinded him to her tact. He persisted: "We could be married secretly. No one needs to know."

She protested, "You can't keep such a thing secret."

He retorted: "Of course you can. They never found out that Sonia Eccleston was married to her manager."

"She never was!"

"I saw her with their child in Switzerland."

"Then it was true! I've heard so many people say so. But I never could be sure."

"It's true. Our marriage could be kept just as secret as that."

"Just about!" she laughed, with sudden triumph.

He was too earnest to realize that he had set a trap and stepped into it till he sprung it.

He was suddenly enraged at her and at himself. He would not accept so farcical a twist to his big scene. He broke out into a flame of wrathful desire, and rose threateningly:

"Marriage or no marriage, Sheila, you've got to belong to me, or—or—"

"Or what?"

"Or you'll never be a star. You'll never play that play of Vickery's or anybody else's. You'll play whatever part I select for you, as your contract says, or you'll play nothing at all."

He only kindled Sheila's tindery temper. She leaped to her feet and stormed up in his face: "Is this a proposal of marriage or a piece of blackmail? I signed a contract, you know, not a receipt for one slave. Marry you, Mr. Reben? Humph! Not if you were the last man on earth! Not if I had to black up and play old darky women."

The passion that overmastered him resolved to overmaster her.

"You can't get away from me. I love you!"

He thrust his left arm back of her and enveloped her in a huge embrace, seizing her right arm in his hand. Sheila had been embraced by numerous men in her stage career. She had stood with their arms about her at rehearsal and before the public. She had replied to their ardors according to the directions of the manuscript—with shyness, with boldness, with rapture.

At one of the rehearsals of "Uncle Dudley," indeed, Reben himself, after complaining of Brereton's manner of clasping Sheila, had climbed to the stage and demonstrated how he wanted Sheila embraced. She had smiled at his awkwardness and thought nothing of it.

But that was play-acting, with people looking on. This was reality, in seclusion. Intention is nearly everything. Then it was business. Now the touch of his hand upon her elbow made her flesh creep; the big arm about her

was as repulsive as a python's coil. She fought away from him in a nausea of hatred. While his muscles exerted all their tyranny over her little body, his lips were pleading, maundering appeals for a little pity, a little love.

She fought him in silence, dreading the scandal of a scream. She wanted none of that publicity. Her silence convinced him that her resistance was not sincere; he thought it really the primeval instinct to put up an interesting struggle and sweeten the surrender.

With a chuckle of triumph he drew her to his breast and thrust his head forward toward the cheek dimly aglow. But just as he would have kissed her she twisted in his clutch and lurched aside, wrenched her right arm free, and bent it round her head to protect her precious flesh. Then as he thrust his head forward again in pursuit of her, she swung her arm back with all her might and drove her elbow into his face.

Some Irish instinct of battle inspired her to swing from waist and shoulder and put her whole weight into the blow. Only his Reben luck saved him from having a mouthful of loose teeth, a broken nose, or a squashed eye. As it was, the little bludgeon fell on his eminent cheekbone with an impact that almost knocked him senseless amid a shower of meteors.

Reben's heartache was transferred to his head. His arms fell from her and romance departed in one enormously prosaic "Ouch!"

The victorious little cave-woman cowered aside and rubbed her bruised elbow, and pouted, and felt ashamed of herself for a terrible brute. Then, as the ancient Amazons must undoubtedly have done after every battle, she began to cry.

Reben was too furious to weep. He nursed his splitting skull in his hands and thought of the Mosaic law "an eye for an eye." He longed for surcease of pain so that he might devise a perfect revenge against the little beast that had tried to murder him just because he paid her the

supreme honor of loving her. He could not trust himself to speak. He found his hat and went out, closing the door softly.

The elevator that took him down returned shortly with Pennock. She had seen Reben cross the hotel lobby, and she came in with a glare of horror. She sniffed audibly the cigar-smoke in the precincts. Her wrath was so dire that she stared at Sheila weeping, and made no motion toward her till Sheila broke out in a clutter of sobs:

"I—I—want some witch-hazel for my elbow. I think I b-b-broke it on old Reben's j-j-jaw."

Then the amazing Pennock caught her in her arms and laughed aloud. It was the first time Sheila had heard her laugh aloud. But when she looked up Pennock was weeping as well, the tears sluicing down into her smile.

CHAPTER XX

SHEILA wept more as Pennock helped her to undress and drew the sleeve tenderly over the invincible elbow. She wept into the bath and she wept into her pillow. She ran a gamut of emotions from self-pity to self-contempt for so unlady-like a method of extricating herself from a predicament that no lady would have got into. She reproached herself for being some kind of miserable reptile to have inspired either the affection or the insolence of so loathsome another reptile as Reben.

Then she bewailed the ruin of her career. That was gone forever. She bewailed the destruction of Vickery's hopes—such a nice boy! If she had not permitted Reben to be so rude to Vickery he never would have been so rude to her. She would give up the stage and go live at her father's house, and die an old maid or marry a preacher or a milkman or something.

She wept herself out so completely that she slept till one o'clock the next afternoon. When she was up she stood at her window and gazed ruefully across the city. On a distant roof she could just see the tall water-tanks marked "Odeon Theater," and a wall of the theater carrying an enormous blazon of the play with Tom Brereton's name in huge letters and hers in large. She would never appear there again. She supposed Reben would send her understudy on to-night. Of course the reading of Vickery's play at three o'clock was all off.

It would be of no use to go to the office. Reben wouldn't be there. He would doubtless be in a hospital with his face in splints.

She wondered if she had fractured his skull—and how many years they gave you for doing that to a man. She could claim that she did it in self-defense, of course, but she had no witnesses to prove it.

She spent hours in putting herself into all imaginable disasters. The breakfast Pennock commanded her to eat she only dabbed at.

At half past three the telephone rang. The office-boy at Reben's hailed her across the wire:

"That choo, M'Skemble? This is Choey. Say, M'Skemble, Mis' Treben wantsa speak choo. Hola wire a min't, please."

Sheila reached out and hooked a chair with her foot and brought it up to catch her when the blow fell. Reben's voice was full of restrained cheerfulness:

"That you, Sheila? Are you ill?"

"Why, no! Why?"

"You had an appointment here at three. We're still waiting."

"But you don't want to see—me, do you?"

"And why not?"

"But last night you said—"

"Last night I was talking to you about personal affairs. This is business. That was at your home. This is my office. Hop in a cab and come on over. I'll explain."

She was in such a daze as she made ready to go that when she had her hat on she could not find it with her hat-pin. Pennock performed the office for her. When she reached Reben's office she meekly edged through the crowd of applicants waiting like the penniless souls on the wrong side of the River Styx. She thought that Eldon must have been one of these once. Some of these were future Eldons, future Booths.

Joey, the office-boy, hailed her with pride, swung the gate open for her, and led her to Reben's door. He did that only for stars or managers or playwrights of recent success.

Reben was alone. He was dabbing his mumpsy cheek with a handkerchief he wet at a bottle. He smiled at her with a mixture of apology and rebuke.

"There you are! the suffragette that took my face for a shop window. I told everybody I stumbled and hit my head on the edge of a table. If you will be kind enough not to deny the story—"

"Of course not! I'm so sorry! I lost my head!"

"Thank you. So did I. Last night I made a fool of myself. To-day I'm a business man again. I made you a proposition or two. You declined both with emphasis. I ought not to have insisted. You didn't have to assassinate me. I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me."

"Of course," said Sheila, sheepishly.

Reben spoke with great dignity, yet with meekness. "We understand each other better now, eh? I meant what I said about being crazy about you. If you'd let me, I could love you very much. If you won't, I'll get over it, I suppose. But the proposition stands. If you would marry me—"

"I'm not going to marry anybody, I tell you."

"You promise me that?"

Sheila felt it safer not to promise forever, but safe enough to say, "Not for a long time, anyway."

Reben stared at her grimly. "Sheila, I'm a business man; you're a business woman. I'll play fair with you if you'll play fair with me. I'll make a star of you if you'll do your share. You wouldn't flirt with me or let me make a fool of you. Then be a man and we'll get along perfectly. If you'll stick to me, not quit me, not hamper me, not play tricks on me, and abide by your contract, I'll do the same for you. I'll put you up in the big lights. Will you stand by me, Sheila, as man to man —on your honor as a gentleman?"

She repeated his words with a kind of amused solemnity: "As man to man, on my honor as a gentleman, I'll stand by you and fulfil my contract."

"Then that's all right. Shake hands on it."

They shook hands. His grasp was hot and fierce and slow to let go. His eyes burned over her with a menace that belied his icy words.

When the bond was sealed with the clasp of hands Reben breathed heavily and pressed a button on his desk. "Now for the young Shakespeare. We've kept him waiting long enough. He's cooled his heels till he must have cold feet by now. Joey, show Mr. Vickery in; and then I don't want to be disturbed by anybody for anything. I'll wring your neck if you ring my telephone—unless the building catches on fire."

"Yes, sir; no, sir," said Joey; and, holding the door ajar, he beckoned and whistled to Vickery, and, having admitted him, dispersed the rabble outside with brevity: "Nothin' doin' to-day, folks. Mis' Treben's went home."

Sheila, Vickery, and Reben regarded one another with the utmost anxiety. They were embarking on a cruise to the Gold Coast. Success would mean a fortune for all; the failure of any would mean disaster to all.

Usually it was next to impossible to persuade Reben to give three consecutive hours of his busy life to an audition; but, once engaged, he listened with amazing analysis. He tried to sit with an imaginary audience. He listened always for the human note. He criticized, as a woman criticizes with reference not to art or logic or truth, but to etiquette, morality, and attractiveness.

The virtuous and scholarly Vickery, as he read his masterwork, was astounded to find his ideals of conduct riddled by a manager, and especially by a Reben. He blushed to be told that his hero was a cad and his heroine a cat. And he could hardly deny the justice of the criticism from Reben's point of view, which was that of an average audience.

Sheila, feeling that Vickery needed support, gave him only her praise, whatever she felt; little giggles of laughter,

little gasps of "Delicious!" and cries of, "Oh, charming!" When with the accidental rarity of a scholar he stumbled into the greatness of a homely sincerity, he was amazed to see that tears were pearling at her eyelids suddenly.

His heart was melted into affection by the collaboration of her sympathy. Without it he would have folded up his manuscript and slunk away, for Reben's comments were more and more confusingly cynical.

When he finished the ordeal Vickery was exhausted, parched of throat and of heart. Sheila flung him adjectives like flowers and his heart went out toward her, but Reben was silent for a long and cruelly anxious while. Then he spoke harshly:

"A manager's main business is to avoid producing plays. It's my business to imagine what faults the public would find and then beat 'em to 'em. There will be plenty of faults left. And don't forget, Mr. Vickery, that every compliment I pay a playwright costs me a thousand dollars or more. Frankly, Mr. Vickery, I don't think your play is right. The idea is there, but you haven't got it."

Vickery's heart sickened. Reben revived it a little.

"Maybe you can fix it up. If you can't I'll have to get somebody to help you. It's too late to produce it this season, anyway. Hot weather is coming on. You have all summer to work at it."

Vickery wondered if he should live so long.

Reben went on: "I—I've been thinking, Sheila—Miss Kemble, that it might be a good idea to try this play out in a stock company. Then Mr. Vickery could see its faults."

Sheila protested, "Oh, but I couldn't let anybody else play it first."

"You could join the company as a guest for a week and play the part yourself."

"Fine!" Sheila exclaimed. "I've been planning to put in a good hard summer in stock. It's such an education—

limbers your mind up so, to play all sorts of parts. See if you can find me a good, coolish sort of town with a decent stock company that will let me in."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Reben, with a salute. "And now, Mr. Vickery, you've got your work cut out, too. See if you can get your play into shape for a stock production."

Reben was attempting to scare Vickery just enough to make him toil, but he would have given up completely if Sheila had not begged him to go on, asked him to come to see her now and then and "talk things over."

He promised with gratitude and went, carrying that burden of delay which weighs down the playwright until he reaches the swift judgment of the critics. When he had gone Reben spoke more confidently of the play. He was already considering the cast. He mentioned various names and discarded this actor or that actress because he or she was a blond or too dark, too tall, or too short, lean, fat, commonplace, eccentric. Nobody quite fitted his pictures of Vickery's people. At length he said:

"I'll tell you a man I've had in mind for the lead. He'd be ideal, I think. He's young, handsome, educated; he's got breeding; he can wear a dress-suit; and he hasn't been on the stage long enough to be spoiled by the gush of fool women. He's tall and athletic and a gentleman."

"And who's all that?" said Sheila. "The angel Gabriel?"

"Young fellow named—er—Elmore—no, Eldon; that's it. You must know him. He was with you in the 'Friend in Need' company."

"Oh yes," Sheila murmured, "I know him."

"How do you think he would do?"

"I think he would be—he would be splendid."

"All right," said Reben. "The stock experience would be good for him, too. He might make a good leading man for you. You could practise team-work together. If he pans out, I could place him with the company we select for you."

"Fine!" said Sheila.

Reben could never have suspected from her tone how deeply she was interested in Eldon. Unwittingly he had torn them asunder just as their romance was ripening into ardor; unwittingly he was bringing them together.

As soon as she left Reben's office Sheila hurried to her room to write Eldon of their reunion. She wrote glowingly and quoted their old phrases. When she had sent the letter off she had a tremor of anxiety. "What if he finds me changed and doesn't like me any more? How will he have changed after a season of success and—Dulcie Ormerod?"

CHAPTER XXI

SHEILA had earned a vacation. And she had nearly a thousand dollars in bank, which was pretty good for a girl of her years, and enough for a golden holiday. But her ambition was burning fiercely now, and after a week or two of golf, tennis, surf, and dance, at her father's Long Island home, she joined the summer stock company in the middle-sized city of Clinton. She did twice her usual work for half her usual salary, but she was determined to broaden her knowledge and hasten her experience.

The heat seemed intentionally vindictive. The labor was almost incredible. One week she exploited all the anguishes of "Camille" for five afternoons and six evenings. During the mornings of that week and all day Sunday she rehearsed the pink plights of "The Little Minister," learning the rôle of Lady Babbie at such odd moments as she could steal from her meals or her slumber or her shopping tours for the necessary costumes. The next week, while she was playing Lady Babbie eleven times, she was rehearsing the masterful heroine of "The Lion and the Mouse" of mornings. While she played this she memorized the slang of "The Chorus Lady" for the following week.

Before the summer was over she had lived a dozen lives and been a dozen people. She had become the pet of the town, more observed than its mayor, and more talked about than its social leader.

She had established herself as a local goddess almost immediately, though she had no time at all for accepting

the hospitalities of those who would fain have had her to luncheons, teas, or dinners.

She had no mornings, afternoons, or evenings that she could call her own. The hardest-worked Swede cook in town would have given notice if such unceasing tasks had been inflicted on her; and the horniest-handed labor-unionist would have struck against such hours as she kept.

To the townspeople she was as care-free and work-free as a fairy, and as impossible to capture. After the matinées throngs of young women and girls waited outside the stage door to see her pass. After the evening performances she made her way through an aisle of adoring young men. She tried not to look tired, though she was as weary as any factory-hand after overtime.

At first she hurried past alone. Later they saw a big fellow at her side who proved to be a new-comer—Eldon. And now the matinée girls divided their allegiance. Eldon's popularity quickly rivaled Sheila's. But he had even less time for making conquests, for he had a slower memory and was not so habited to stage formulas.

Nor had he any heart for conquests. A certain number of notes came to his letter-box, some of them anonymous tributes from overwhelmed young maidens; some of them brazen proffers of intrigue from women old enough to know better, or bound by their marriage lines to do better.

Eldon, who had thought that vice was a city ware, and that actors were dangerous elements in a small town, got a new light on life and on the theory that women are the pursued and not the pursuers.

But these wild-oat seeds of the Clinton fast set fell upon the rock where Sheila's name was carved. He found her subtly changed. She was the same sweet, sympathetic, helpful Sheila that had been his comrade in art; but he could not recapture the Sheila that had shared his dreams of love.

As in the old Irish bull of the two men who met on

London Bridge, they called each other by name, then "looked again, and it was nayther of us."

The Sheila and Eldon that met now were not the Sheila and Eldon that had bade each other good-by. They had not outgrown each other, but they had grown away from each other—and behold it was neither of them.

The Eldon that Sheila had grown so fond of was a shy, lonely, blundering, ignorant fellow of undisclosed genius. It had delighted Sheila to perceive his genius and to mother him. He was like the last and biggest of her dolls.

But now he was no longer a boy; he was a man whose gifts had proved themselves, who had "learned his strength" before audience after audience clear across the continent. Dulcie Ormerod had irritated him, but she had left him in no doubt of his power.

Already he had maturity, authority, and the confidence of a young Siegfried wandering through the forest and understanding the birds that sang him up and sang him onward.

He was a total stranger to Sheila. She could not mother him. He did not come to her to cure his despair and kindle ambition. He came to her in the armor of success and claimed her for his own.

At first he alarmed her more than Reben had. She felt that he could never truly belong to her again. And she felt no impulse to belong to him. She liked him, admired him, enjoyed his brilliant personality, but rather as a gracious competitor than any longer as a partner.

To Eldon, however, the change endeared Sheila only the more. She was fairer and wiser and surer, worthier of his love in every way. He could not understand why she loved him no longer. But he could not fail to see that her heart had changed. It seemed a treachery to him, a treachery he could feel and not believe possible.

When he sought to return to the room he had tenanted in her heart he found it locked or demolished. He could

never gain a moment of solitude with her. Their former long walks were not to be thought of.

"Clinton isn't Chicago, old boy," Sheila said. "Everybody in this town knows us a mile off. And we've no time for flirting or philandering or whatever it was we were doing in Chicago. I'm too busy, and so are you."

Eldon's heart suffered at each rebuff. He murmured to her that she was cruel. He thought of her as false when he thought of her at all. But that was not so often as he thought. He was too horribly busy.

To a layman the conditions of a stock company are almost unbelievable: the actors work double time, day and night shifts both. Most of the company were used to the life. In the course of years they had acquired immense repertoires. They had educated their memories to amazing degrees. They could study a new rôle between the acts of the current production.

Sheila and Eldon had not that advantage. They spent the intermission after one act in boning up for the next, rubbing the lines into the mind as they rubbed greasepaint into the skin.

The barge of dreams was a freight-boat for them.

When Pennock wakened Sheila of mornings it was like dragging her out of the grave. She came up dead; desperately resisting the recall to life. At night she sank into her sleep as into a welcome tomb. She was on her feet almost always. Her hours in the playmill averaged fourteen a day. She grew haggard and petulant. Eldon feared for her health.

Yet the theater was her gymnasium. She was acquiring a post-graduate knowledge of stage practice, supplying her mind as well as her muscles, like a pianist who practises incessantly. If she kept at it too long she would become a mere audience-pounder. If she quit in time the training would be of vast profit.

One stifling afternoon Eldon begged her to take a drive with him between matinée and night, out to "Lotus

Land," a tawdry pleasure-park where one could look at water and eat in an arbor. She begged off because she was too busy.

She had no sooner finished the refusal than he saw her face light up. He saw her run to meet a lank, lugubrious young man. He saw idolatry in the stranger's eyes and extraordinary graciousness in Sheila's. He heard Sheila invite the new-comer to buggy-ride with her to "Lotus Land" and take dinner outdoors.

Eldon dashed away in a rage of jealousy. Sheila did not reach the theater that night till after eight o'clock.

She nearly committed the unpardonable sin of holding the curtain. The stage-manager and Eldon were out looking for her when they saw a bouncing buggy drawn by a lean livery horse driven by a lean, liverish man. Up the alley they clattered and Sheila leaped out before the contraption stopped.

She called to the driver: "G'-by! See you after the performance." She called to the stage-manager: "Don't say it! Just fine me!" Eldon held the stage door open for her. All she said was: "Whew! Don't shoot!"

She had no time to make up or change her costume. She walked on as she was.

After the performance Eldon came down in his street clothes to demand an explanation. He saw the same stranger waiting for Sheila, and dared not trust himself to speak to her.

The next morning, at rehearsal, he said to Sheila, with laborious virulence, "Where's your friend this morning?"

"He went back to town."

"How lonely you must feel!"

Sheila was startled at the same twang of jealousy she had heard in Reben's voice when she and Vickery first met. It angered and alarmed her a little. She explained to Eldon who Vickery was, and that he had run down to discuss his new version of the play. Eldon was mollified a little, but Sheila was not.

Vickery, whose health was none too good, found it tedious to make a journey from Braywood to Clinton every time he wanted to ask Sheila's advice on a difficulty. He suddenly appeared in Clinton with all his luggage. He put it on the ground of convenience in his work. It must have been partly on Sheila's account.

Eldon noted that Sheila, who had been rarely able to spare a moment with him, found numberless opportunities to consult with this playwright. Sheila's excuse was that business compelled her to keep in close touch with her next starring vehicle; her reason was that she found Vickery oddly attractive as well as oddly irritating.

In the first place, he was writing a play for her, for the celebration of her genius. That was attractive, certainly. In the second place, he was not very strong and not very comfortable financially. That roused a sort of mother-sense in her. She felt as much enthusiasm for his career as for her own. And then, of course, he proceeded to fall in love with her. It was so easy to modulate from the praise of her gifts to the praise of her beauty, from the influence she had over the general public to her influence over him in particular.

He exalted her as a goddess. He painted her future as the progress of Venus over the ocean. He would furnish the ocean. He wrote poems to her. And it must be intensely comforting to have poems written at you; it must be hard to remain immune to a sonnet.

Vickery quoted love-scenes from his play and applied them to Sheila. He very slyly attempted to persuade her to rehearse the scenes with him as hero. But that was not easy when they were buggy-riding.

When he grew demonstrative she could hardly elbow his teeth down his throat; for his manner was not Reben's. It needed no blow to quell poor Vickery's hopes. It needed hardly a rebuke. It needed nothing more than a lack of response to his ardor. Then his wings would droop as if he found a vacuum beneath them.

To repel Reben even by force of arms had seemed the only decent thing that Sheila could do. She was keeping herself precious, as her father told her to. To keep Eldon at a distance seemed to be her duty, at least until she could be sure that she loved him as he plainly loved her. But to fend off Vickery's love seemed to her a sin. That would be quenching a fine, fiery spirit.

But, dearly as she cherished Vickery, she felt no impulse to surrender, not even to that form of conquest which women call surrender. And yet she nearly loved him. Her feeling was much, much more than liking, yet somehow it was not quite loving. She longed to form a life-alliance with him, but a marriage of minds, not of bodies and souls.

And Vickery proposed a very different partnership from the league that Eldon planned. Eldon was awfully nice, but so all the other women thought. And if she and Eldon should marry and co-star together, there could be no success for them, not even bread and butter for two, unless lots and lots of women went crazy over Eldon. Sheila had little doubt that the women would go crazy fast enough, but she wondered how she would stand it to be married to a matinée idol. She wondered if she had jealousy in her nature—she was afraid she had.

In complete contrast with Eldon's life, Vickery's would be devoted to the obscurity of his desk and the creation of great rôles for her to publish. If any fascinating were to be done, Sheila would do it. She thought it far better for a man to keep his fascination in his wife's name.

Thus the young woman debated in her heart the merits of the rival claimants. So doubtless every woman does who has rival claimants.

Sometimes when Vickery was unusually harrowing in his inability to write the play right, and Eldon was unusually successful in a performance, Sheila would say that, after all, the better choice would be the great, handsome, magnetic man.

Playwrights and things were pretty sure to be uncertain, absent-minded, moody, querulous. She had heard much about the moods of creative geniuses and the terrible lives they led their wives. Wasn't it Byron or Bulwer Lytton or somebody who bit his wife's cheek open in a quarrel at the breakfast-table or something? That would be a nice thing for Vickery to do in a hotel dining-room.

He might develop an insane jealousy of her and forbid her to appear to her best advantage. Worse yet, he might devote some of his abilities to creating rôles for other women to appear in.

He might not always be satisfied to write for his wife. In fact, now and then he had alluded to other projects and had spoken with enthusiasm of other actresses whom Sheila didn't think much of. And, once—oh yes!—once he spoke of writing a great play for Mrs. Rhys, that statue in cold lava whom even Reben could endure no longer.

A pretty thing it would be, wouldn't it, to have Sheila's own husband writing a play for that Rhys woman? Well —humph! Well! And Sheila had wondered if jealousy were part of her equipment!

Between the actor and the playwright there was little choice.

A manager also had offered himself to Sheila. She could have Reben for the asking. If he were not so many things she couldn't endure the thought of, he might make a very good husband. He at least would be free from temperament and personality. Two temperaments in one family would be rather dangerous.

These thoughts, if they were distinct enough to be called thoughts, drifted through her brain like flotsam on the stream of the unending demands of her work. This was wearing her down and out till, sometimes, she resolved that whoever it might be she married he needn't expect her to go on acting.

This pretty well cleared her slate of suitors, for Reben,

as well as the other two, had never suggested anything except her continuance in her career. As if a woman had no right to rest! As if this everlasting battle were not bad for a woman!

In these humors her fatigue spoke for her. And fatigue is always the bitter critic of any trade that creates it. Frequently Sheila resolved to leave the stage. Often, as she fell into her bed and closed her lead-loaded eyelashes on her calcium-seared eyes and stretched her boards-weary soles down into the cool sheets, she said that she would exchange all the glories of Lecouvreur, Rachel, Bernhardt, and Duse for the greater glory of sleeping until she had slept enough.

When Pennock nagged her from her Eden in the morning Sheila would vow that as soon as this wretched play of that brute of a Vickery was produced she would never enter a theater again at the back door. If the Vickery play were the greatest triumph of the cycle, she would let somebody else—anybody else—have it. Mrs. Rhys and Dulcie Ormerod could toss pennies for it.

CHAPTER XXII

EVENTUALLY Vickery's play was ready for production. At least Reben told him, with Job's comfort:

"We've all worked at it till we don't know what it's about. We've changed everything in it, so let's put it on and get rid of it."

The weather of the rehearsal week for the Vickery play was barbarously hot. The theater at night was a sea of rippling fans. The house was none the less packed; the crowd was almost always the same. People had their theater nights as they had their church nights. The prices were very low and a seat could be had for the price of an ice-cream soda. People were no hotter in the theater than on their own porches, and the play took their minds off their thermometers.

Reben had come down for the rehearsals. There were to be few of them—five mornings and Sunday. There was no chance to put in or take out. The actors could do no more than tack their lines to their positions.

Still Reben found so much fault with everything that Vickery was ready for the asylum. Sheila simply had to comfort him through the crisis. Eldon proceeded to complicate matters by developing into a fiend of jealousy. Fatigue and strain and the weather were all he could bear. The extra courtesies to Vickery were the final back-breaking straws.

He told Sheila he had a mind to throw the play. The distracted girl, realizing his irresponsible and perilous state, tried to tide him over the ordeal by adopting him and

mothering him with melting looks and rapturous compliments. This course brought her into further difficulties with the peevish author.

While they were rehearsing Vickery's play they were of course performing another.

By some unconscious irony the manager had chosen to revive a melodrama of arctic adventure, thinking perhaps to cool the audience with the journey to boreal regions. The actors were forced to dress in polar-bear pelts, and each costume was an ambulant Turkish bath. The men wore long wigs and false beards. The spirit gum that held the false hair in place frequently washed away from the raining pores and there were astonishingly sudden shaves that sent the audience into peals of laughter.

Eldon congratulated himself that his face at least was free, for he was a faithful Eskimo. But in one scene, which had been rehearsed without the properties, it was his duty to lose his life in saving his master's life. On the first night of the performance the hero and the villain struggled on two big wabbly blocks of blue papier-maché supposed to represent icebergs. Eldon, the Eskimo, was slain and fell dead to magnificent applause. But his perspiratory glands refused to die and his diaphragm continued to pant.

And then his grateful master delivered a farewell eulogy over him. And as a last tribute spread across his face a great suffocating polar-bear skin! There were fifteen minutes more of the act, and Sheila in the wings wondered if Eldon would be alive or completely Desdemonatized when the curtain fell.

He lived, but for years after he felt smothered whenever he remembered that night.

During the rest of the week his master's farewell tribute was omitted at Eldon's request. But it was impossible to change the scene to Florida and the arctic costumes had to be endured. Sheila's own costumes were almost fatal to her.

And that was the play they played afternoons and evenings while they devoted their mornings to whipping Vickery's drama into shape.

And now Reben, goaded by the heat as by innumerable gnats, and fuming at the time he was wasting in the dull, hot town where there was nothing to do of evenings but walk the stupid streets or visit a moving-picture shed or see another performance of that detestable arctic play—Reben proceeded to resent Sheila's graciousness to both actor and author and to demand a little homage for the lonely manager.

Sheila said to Pennock: "I'm going to run away to some nice quiet madhouse and ask for a padded cell and iron bars. I want to go before they take me. If I don't I'll commit murder or suicide. These men! these men! these infernal men! Why don't they let me alone?"

All Pennock could say was: "There, there, there, you poor child! Let me put a cold cloth on your head."

"If you could pour cold water on the men I'd be all right," Sheila would groan. She had hysterics regularly every night when she got to her room. She would scream and pull her hair and stamp her feet and wail: "I vow I'll never act again. Or if I do, I'll never marry; or if I marry, I'll marry somebody that never heard of the stage. I'll marry a Methodist preacher. They don't believe in the theater, and neither do I!"

Thus Sheila stormed against the men. But her very excitement showed that love was becoming an imperious need. She was growing up to her mating-time. Just now she was like a bird surrounded by suitors, and they were putting on their Sunday feathers for her, trilling their best, and fighting each other for her possession. She was the mistress of the selection, coy, unconvinced, and in a runaway humor.

Three men had made ardent love to her, and her heart had slain them each in turn. She was a veritable Countess

of Monte Cristo. She had scored off "One!" "Two!" and "Three!"

This left her with nothing to wed but her career. And she was disgusted with that.

Only her long training and her tremendous resources of endurance could have carried her through that multiplex exhaustion of every emotion.

Numbers of soldiers desert the firing-line in almost every battle. Occasional firemen refrain from dashing into burning and collapsing buildings. Policemen sometimes feel themselves outnumbered beyond resistance. But actors do not abstain from first-night performances. Even a death-certificate is hardly excuse enough for that treachery.

So on the appointed night Sheila played the part that Vickery wrote for her, and played it brilliantly. She stepped on the stage as from a bandbox and she flitted from scene to scene with the volatility of a humming-bird.

Eldon covered himself with glory and lent her every support. The kiln-dried company danced through the other rôles with vivacity and the freshness of débutancy. They had had the unusual privilege of a Monday afternoon off.

The big face of the audience that night glistened with joy and perspiration, and found the energy somewhere to demand a speech from the author and another from Sheila.

Vickery was in the seventh heaven. If there were an eighth it would belong to playwrights who see the chaos of their manuscripts changed into men and women applauded by a multitude. Vickery could not believe the first howl of laughter from the many-headed, one-mooded beast. The second long roll of delight rendered him to the clouds. He went up higher on the next, and when a meek little witticism of his was received with an earthquake of joy, followed by a salvo of applause, he hardly recognized the moon as he shot past it.

Later, there were moments of tautness and hush when the audience sat on the edge of its seats and held its breath with excitement. That was heroic bliss. But when from his coign of espionage in the back of a box he saw tears glistening on the eyes of pretty girls, and old women with handkerchiefs at their wet cheeks, and hard-faced business men sneaking their thumbs past their dripping lashes, the ecstasy was divine. When the tension was relaxed and the audience blew its great nose he thought he heard the music of the spheres.

The play was almost an hour too long, but the audience risked the last street-cars and stuck to its post till the delightful end. Then it lingered to applaud the curtain up three times. As the amiable mob squeezed out, Vickery wound his way among it, eavesdropping like a spy, and hearing nothing but good of his work and of its performers.

As soon as he could he worked his way free and darted back to the stage. There he found Sheila standing and crying her heart out with laughter, while Eldon held one hand and Reben the other.

Vickery thrust in between them, caught her hands away from theirs, and gathered her into his arms. And kissed her. Both were laughing and both were crying. It was a very salty kiss, but he found it wonderful.

CHAPTER XXIII

WERE it not for hours like these, the hope of them or the memory of them, few people would continue to trudge the dolorous road of the playwright. Such hours come rarely and they do not linger unspoiled, but they are glimpses of heaven while they last. It was not for long that Vickery and Sheila were left seated upon the sunny side of Saturn with the rings of unearthly glory swirling round them.

Their return to earth was all the more jolting for the distance they had to fall.

Sheila saw Eldon turn away in a sudden rancor of jealousy. She saw Reben turn swart with rage. His cruel mouth twisted into a sneer, and when Vickery turned to him with the gratitude of a child to a rescuing angel Reben's comments wiped the smile off Vickery's rosy face and left it white and sick.

Sheila suffered all her own shocks and vicariously those of each of the three she had embroiled. She suffered most for the young creator who had seen that his work was good but must yet hear Satan's critique. And Reben looked like a wise and haughty Lucifer when in answer to Vickery's appealing "Well?" he said:

"Well, you certainly got over—here. They like it. No doubt of that. But they liked 'The Nautilus.' It broke all records here in Clinton and lasted two nights in New York.

"You mustn't let 'em fool you, my boy. This stock company is a kind of religion to these yokels. They snap up whatever you throw 'em the way a sea-lion snaps up a

fish. Anything on God's earth will go here. Just copper your bets all round. Whatever went here will flop in New York, and *vice versa*. Did you hear 'em howl at that old wheeze in the first act? Broadway would throw the seats at you if you sprung it. The one scene that fell flat to-night is the one scene worth keeping in.

"You've got a lot of work to do. You'd better let me bring Ledley or somebody down here to whip it into shape. As it stands, I don't see how I can use it. Look me up next time you're in town—if you can bring me some new ideas."

Then he turned to Sheila and, taking her by that dangerous elbow, led her aside and murdered her joy. He was perfectly sincere about his distrust of the piece. He had seen so many false hopes come up like violets in the snow, only to wither at the first sharp weather.

He answered Sheila's defiant "Say it" with another icy blast:

"You poor child!" he said. "You were awful. I want you to close with this stock company and take a good rest. You're all frayed out. You looked a hundred years old and you played like a hack-horse. That man Eldon was the only one of you who played up to form. He's a discovery. Now I'm going back to town to see if I can get a real play for you, and you run along home to your papa and mamma and see if you can't get back your youth. But don't be discouraged." Having absolutely crushed her, he told her not to be discouraged.

When he had pointed out that the laurel crowns were really composed of poison ivy he waved a cheerful good-by and hurried off to catch the midnight train to New York.

Sheila turned the eyes of utter wretchedness upon Vickery, in whose face was the look of a stricken stag. They had planned to take supper together, but she begged off. She felt that it was kinder.

Besides, Vickery would have to work all night. The

stage director had told him that he must cut at least an hour out of the manuscript before the special rehearsal next morning. And the cuts must be made in chunks because the company had to begin rehearsals at once of the next week's bill, an elaborate production of one of Mr. Cohan's farces, in his earlier manner.

As Sheila left the stage she met Eldon staring at her hungrily. Reben had not spoken to him. Sheila had to tell him that the manager's only praise was for him. But he could get no pleasure from the bouquet because it included rue for Sheila:

"He's a liar. You were magnificent!" Eldon cried.

"Thank you, Floyd," she sighed, and, smiling at grief like Patience, shook her head sadly and went to her dressing-room. She was almost too bankrupt of strength to take off her make-up. She worked drearily and smearily in disgust, leaving patches of color here and there. Then she slipped into a mackintosh and stumbled to the waiting carriage.

When she got to her room she let Pennock take off the mackintosh and her shoes and stockings; she was asleep almost before she finished whimpering her only prayer:

"O God, help me to quit the stage—forever. Amen!"

Pennock stared at her dismally and saw that even her slumber was shaken with little sobs.

CHAPTER XXIV

SHEILA was late at the rehearsal the next morning, and so dejected that she hardly felt regret at hearing Vickery tell her how many of her favorite scenes had to be omitted because they were not essential. Vickery held command of the company with the plucky misery of a Napoleon retreating from his Moscow.

When this rehearsal was over the director told Sheila that she need not stay to rehearse the next week's bill, since Reben had asked him to release her from further work. He had telegraphed to New York for a woman who had played the same part with great success, and received answer that she would be able to step in without inconvenience. Sheila was dolefully relieved. She felt that she could never have learned another rôle. She felt almost grateful to Reben. "My brain has stopped," she told Pennock; "just stopped."

The Tuesday afternoon matinée was always the worst of the week. The heat was like a persecution. The actors played havoc with cues and lines, and the suffocated audience was too indifferent to know or care.

After the performance Vickery was so lost to hope that he grew sardonic. He said with a tormented smile:

"It's a pity Reben didn't stay over. If he had seen how badly this performance went he would have sworn that the play would run a year on his dear damned Broadway. I'm going to telegraph him so."

Tuesday night the house was again poor, though better than at the matinée. The company settled down into harness like draught-horses beginning a long pull. The

laughter was feeble and not focused. It was indeed so scattered that the voice of one man was audible above the rest.

Out of the silences or the low murmurs of laughter resounded the gigantic roars of this single voice. People in the audience twisted about to see who it was. The people on the stage were confused at first, and later amused. They also made more or less concealed efforts to place the fellow.

By and by the audience began to catch the contagion of his mirth. It laughed first at his laughter, and then at the play. During the third act the piece was going so well that it was impossible to pick out any individual noise.

After the last curtain a number of townspeople went back on the stage to tell Sheila how much they liked the play, and especially her work. They had read the glowing criticisms in the morning and evening papers. They had not heard what Reben had said of what Broadway would say. They would not have cared. Broadway was suspect in Clinton.

These bouquets had the savor of artificial flowers to Sheila, but she enacted the rôle of gratitude to the best of her ability. Back of the knot surrounding her she saw Vickery standing with a towering big fellow evidently waiting to be presented. Then she saw Eldon shaking hands with the stranger.

Bret Winfield was suffering from stage-fright. He had met Vickery in New York and had promised to run down to see his play, and incidentally to square himself with the girl he had frightened. In the generally disheveled state of brains that characterizes a playwright during rehearsal, Vickery had neglected to tell Winfield that the company contained also the man that Winfield had vowed to square himself with.

When, years before at Leroy, Eldon, as the taxicab-driver, had floated Winfield over the footlights, he had

worn a red wig and disguising make-up. When Winfield saw him on the stage as a handsome youth perfectly groomed, there was no resemblance. Eldon's name was on the program, but Winfield was one of those who pay little heed to programs, prefaces, and title-pages. He was one of those who never know the names of the authors, actors, composers, printers, and architects whose work pleases them. They "know what they like," but they never know who made it.

As he waited to reach Sheila, Winfield noted Eldon standing in a little knot of admirers of his own. He said to Vickery, with that elegance of diction which has always distinguished collegians:

"That lad who played your hero is a great little actor, 'Gene. He's right there all the time. I'd like to slip it to him."

Vickery absently led him to Eldon and introduced the two, swallowing both names. The two powerful hands met in a warm clutch that threatened to become a test of grip. Winfield poured out his homage:

"You're certainly one actor, Mr.—er—er— You've got a sad, solemn way of pulling your laughs that made me make a fool of myself."

"You're very kind to think so," said Eldon, overjoyed to get such praise from a man of such weight. And he crushed Winfield's fingers with a power that enhanced the layman's respect still further. Winfield crushed back with all his might as he repeated:

"Yes, sir. You're sure some comedian, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Eldon," said Eldon.

Winfield's grip relaxed so unexpectedly that Eldon almost cracked a bone or two before he could check his muscles. Winfield turned white and red in streaks and said:

"Eldon? Your name's Eldon?"

Eldon nodded.

"Are you the Eldon that knocked a fellow about my

size about ten yards for a touch-down across the foot-lights once?"

Eldon blushed to find his prowess fame, and said: "Yes. Once."

"Well, I'm the fellow," said Winfield, trying to call his ancient grudge to the banquet. "I've been looking for you ever since. I promised myself the pleasure of beating you up."

Eldon laughed: "Well, here I am. I've been ashamed of it for a long time. I took an unfair advantage of you."

"Advantage nothing," said Winfield. "I ought to have been on my guard."

"Well," Eldon suggested. "Suppose I stand down here on the apron of the stage and let you have a whack at me. See if you can put me into the orchestra chairs farther than I put you."

Winfield sighed. "Hell! I can't hit you now. I've shaken hands with you, unbeknownst. I guess it's all off. I couldn't slug a man that made me laugh so hard. Shake!"

He put out his hand and the enemies gripped a truce. Winfield was laughing, but there was a bitterness in his laugh. He had been struck in the face and he could not requite the debt.

Then Vickery called him to where Sheila, having rid herself of her admirers, was making ready to leave the stage.

"Miss Kemble, I want to present my old friend, Mr. Bret Winfield. He's been dying to meet you again for a long while."

"Again?" thought Sheila, but she said, as if to her oldest friend: "Oh, I'm delighted! I haven't seen you since— since— Chicago, wasn't it?"

Vickery laughed and explained: "Guess again! You've met before, but you were never introduced."

Slowly Sheila understood. She stared up at Winfield and cried, "This isn't the man who—"

"I'm the little fellow," said Winfield, enfolding her hand in a clasp like a boxing-glove. "I scared you pretty badly, I'm afraid. But Vickery tells me he told you my intentions were honorable. I've come to apologize."

"Oh, please don't! I'm the one that ought to. I made an awful idiot of myself; but, you see, I was afraid you were going to—to—well, kidnap me."

"I wish I could now!"

"Kidnap me?" Sheila gasped with a startled frown-smile, drawing her brows down and her lips up.

He lowered his high head and his low voice to murmur, with an impudence that did not offend her, "You're too darned nice to waste your gifts on the public."

"Waste them!—on the public?" Sheila mocked. "And what ought I to do with them, then?"

He spoke very earnestly. "Invest them in a nice quiet home. You oughtn't to be slaving away like this to amuse a good-for-nothing mob. You let some big husky fellow do the work and build you a pretty home. Then you just stay home and—and—bloom for him—like a rose on a porch. I tell you if I had you I'd lock you up where the crowds couldn't see you."

Sheila put back her head and laughed at the utter ridiculousness of such insolence. Then her laugh stopped short. The word "home" got her by the throat. And the words "bloom just for him" brought sudden dew to her eyes.

She had hurt Winfield by her laughter. Under the raillery of it he had muttered a curt "Good night" without heeding her sudden softness.

He had rejoined Eldon and Vickery. Of the three tall men he was the least gifted, the least spiritual. But he was the only one of the three, the only one of all her admirers, who had not urged her forward on this weary climb

up the sun-beaten hill. He was the only one who had suggested twilight and peace and home.

At any other time his counsel would have wakened her fiery dissent. Now in her fatigue and her loneliness it soothed her like the occasional uncanny wisdom of a fool.

CHAPTER XXV

THAT night Sheila went to bed to sleep out sleep. When Pennock asked, on leaving her arranged for slumber, "Will you be called at the usual hour, please?" Sheila answered, "I won't be called at all, please!"

This privilege alone was like a title of gentility to a tired laundress. There would be no rehearsal on the morrow for her.

The other galley-slaves in the company must still bend to the oar, but she had shore leave of mornings, and after Saturday she was free altogether.

Now that she had time to be tired, old aches and fatigues whose consideration had had to be postponed came thronging upon her, till she wondered how she had endured the toil. Still more she wondered why.

Then she wondered nothing at all for a good many hours, until the old habit of being called awakened her. She glanced at her watch, saw that it was half past ten, and flung out of bed, gasping, "They'll be rehearsing and I'm not there!"

Then she remembered her liberty, and stood feeling pleasantly foolish. The joy of toppling back to bed was more than payment for the fright she had suffered. It was glorious to float like a basking swimmer on the surface of sleep, with little ripples of unconsciousness washing over her face and little sunbeams of dream between.

In the half-awake moods she reviewed her ambitions with an indolent contempt. That man Winfield's words came back to her. After all, she had no home except her father's summer cottage. And she had been planning no

home except possibly another such place whither she would retire in the late spring until the early fall, to rest from last season's hotels and recuperate for next season's. Yes, that was just about the home life she had sketched out!

It occurred to her now that her plans had been unhuman and unwomanly. "A woman's place is the home," she said. It was not an original thought, but it came to her with a sudden originality as sometimes lines she had heard or had spoken dozens of times abruptly became real.

She wanted a pretty little house where she could busy herself with pretty little tasks while her big, handsome husband was away earning a pretty little provender for both of them. She would be a young mother-bird haunting the nest, leaving the male bird to forage and fight. That was the life desirable and appropriate. Women were not made to work. An actress was an abnormal creature.

Sheila did not realize that the vast majority of homekeeping women must work quite as hard as the actress, with no vacations, little income, and less applause. The picture of the husband returning laughing to his eager spouse was a decidedly idealized view of a condition more unfailing in literature than in life. Some of those housewives who had grown tired of their lot, as she of hers, would have told her that most husbands return home weary and discontented, to listen with small interest to their weary and discontented wives. And many husbands go out again soon after they have come home again.

Sheila was doing what the average person does in criticizing the stage life—magnifying its faults and contrasting it, not with the average home, but with an ideal condition not often to be found, and less often lasting when found.

Sheila had known so little of the average family existence that she imagined it according to the romantic

formula, "And so they were married and lived happily ever afterward." She thought that that would be very nice. And she lolled at her ease, weltering in visions of cozy domesticity with peace and a hearth and a noble American citizen and the right number of perfectly fascinating children painlessly borne and painlessly borne with.

Anything, anything would be better than this business of rehearsing and rehearsing and squabbling and squabbling, and then settling down into a dismal repetition of the same old nonsense in the same old theater or in a succession of same old theaters.

How good it was, just not to have to learn a new play for next week! It was good that there was no opportunity to rehearse any further revisions even of poor Vickery's play. There was almost a consolation in the thought that it had not succeeded with Reben. Perhaps Reben would be a long while discovering a substitute. Sheila hoped he would not find one till the new year. She almost hoped he would never find one.

She was awfully sorry for poor Vickery. He had suffered so cruelly, and she had suffered with him. Perhaps he would give up play-writing now and take up some less inhuman trade. To think that she had once dallied with the thought of marrying him! To play plays was bad enough, but to be the wife of a playwright—no, thank you! Better be the gambler's wife of a less laborious gambler or the nurse to a moody lunatic under more restraint.

Worse yet, Sheila had narrowly escaped falling in love with an actor! They would have been Mr. and Mrs. Traveling Forever! Mr. and Mrs. Never Rest! To live in hotels and railroad stations, sleeping-car berths, and dressing-rooms of about the same size; to put on a lot of sticky stuff and go out and parrot a few lines, then to retire and grease out the paint, and stroll to a supper-room, and so to bed. To make an ambition of that! No, thank you! Not on your *jamais de la vie*, never!

And thus having with a drowsy royalty effaced all her plans from her books, she burned her books. Desdemona's occupation was gone. She might as well get up. She bathed and dressed and breakfasted with splendid deliberation, and then, the day proving to be fine and sunny and cool when she raised her tardy curtains, she decided to go forth for a walk, the dignified saunter of a lady, and not the mad rush of a belated actress. It wanted yet an hour before she must make up for the matinée.

She had not walked long when she heard her name called from a motor-car checked at the curb. She turned to see Eugene Vickery waving his cap at her. Bret Winfield, at the wheel, was bowing bareheaded. They invited her to go with them for a ride. It struck her as a providential provision of just what she would have wished for if she had thought of it.

Vickery stepped down to open the door for her, and, helping her in, stepped in after her. Winfield reached back his hand to clasp hers, and Vickery said:

"Drive us about a bit, chauffeur."

"Yes, sir!" said Winfield, touching his cap. And he lifted the car to a lively gait.

"Where did you get the machine?" said Sheila.

"It's his—Bret's—Mr. Winfield's," said Vickery. "He came down in it—to see that infernal play of mine. Do you know, I think I've discovered one thing that's the matter with it. In that scene in the first act, you know, where—"

He rambled on with intense enthusiasm, but Sheila was thinking of the man at the wheel. He was rich enough to own a car and clever enough to run it. As she watched he guided it through a swarm of traffic with skill and coolness.

Now and then Winfield threw a few words over his left shoulder. They had nothing to do with things theatrical —just commonplace high spirits on a fine day. Sheila did like him ever so much.

By and by he drew up to the curb and got down, motioning to Vickery with the thumb of authority. "I'm tired of letting you monopolize Miss Kemble, 'Gene. I'm going to ask her to sit up with me."

"But I'm telling her about my play," said Vickery. "Now, in the middle of the last act—"

"If you don't mind," said Sheila, "I should like to ride awhile with Mr. Winfield. The air's better."

Winfield opened the door for her, helped her down and in again, and resumed his place.

"See how much better the car runs!" he said.

And to Sheila it seemed that it did run better. Their chatter ran about as importantly as the engines, but it was cheerful and brisk.

Every man has his ailment, at least one. The only flaw in Winfield's powerful make-up was the astigmatism that compelled him to wear glasses. Sheila rather liked them. They gave an intellectual touch to a face that had no other of the sort. Besides, actor-people usually prefer a touch of what they call "character" to what they call "a straight."

Winfield told Sheila that his glasses had kept him from playing football, but had not hampered his work in the 'varsity crew. He could see as far as the spinal column of the oarsman in front of him, and that was all he was supposed to see once the race began.

He explained that his glasses had fallen from his eyes when he stepped on the stage at Leroy. That had been one reason why Eldon had got home on him so easily.

Evidently this unpaid account was still troubling him.

"I hate to owe a man a dollar or a kindness or a blow," he said. "I've lost my chance to pay that man Eldon what was due, and I'll never get another chance. Our paths will never cross again, I'm afraid.

"I hope not!" Sheila cried.

"Why?"

"Because you're both such powerful men. He was a football-player, you know."

"Oh, was he?"

"Oh yes. And he keeps himself in trim. Most actors do. They never know when they'll have to appear bare-armed. And then they meet such awful people sometimes."

"Oh, do they? And you think he would whip me, eh?"

"Oh no. I don't think either of you could whip the other. But it would be terrible to have either of you hurt either of you."

Winfield laughed, but all he said was, "You're a mighty nice girl."

She laughed, "Thanks."

Then both looked about guiltily to see if Vickery were listening. Nothing important had been said, but their hearts had been fencing, or at least feinting, at a sort of flirtation.

Vickery was gone.

"For Heaven's sake!" said Sheila.

"He probably dropped out when we stopped some time ago to let that wagon pass."

"I wonder why?" Sheila said, anxiously.

"Oh," Winfield laughed, "'Gene's such an omni—om—he reads so much he's probably read that two's company and three's a crowd."

This was a trifle uncomfortable for Sheila, so she said, "What time is it, please?"

"Half past one, or worse," said Winfield, pointing with his toe to the auto-clock. "That's usually slow."

"Good Lord! I ought to be in the shop this minute. Turn round and fly!"

They were far out in the country. Winfield looked regretfully at the vista ahead. Turning round in a narrow road was a slow and maddening process, and Sheila's nerves grated like the clutch. Once faced townward, they sped ferociously. She doubted if she would ever

arrive alive. There were swoops and skids and flights of chickens and narrow escapes from the murder of dogs who charged ferociously and vanished in a diminuendo of yelps.

There followed an exciting race with the voice of a motor-cycle coming up from the rear. Winfield laughed it to scorn until Sheila, glancing back, saw that it carried a policeman.

"He's waving to us. Stop!"

"If I do we'll never make it. I'll put you in the theater on time if I go to jail for life."

"No, no; I won't get you into trouble. Please stop. He looks like a nice policeman. I'll tell him you're a doctor and I'm a trained nurse."

Winfield slowed down, and the policeman came up, sputtering like his own blunderbuss. Sheila tried to look like a trained nurse, but missed the costume and the make-up. She began at once:

"Oh, please, Mr. Officer, it's all my fault. You see, the doctor has a dying patient, and I—I—"

"Why, it's Sheila Ke— Miss Kemble! Ain't you playin' this afternoon?"

"Oh yes, it's me—and I ought to be, but I was detained, and that's why—"

"Well, you better hurry up or you'll keep folks waitin'. My wife's there this afternoon. I seen you myself last night."

"Did you? Oh, thank you so much! Good-by!"

As Winfield's car slid forward they heard the policeman's voice: "Better go kind o' slow crossing Fifth Street. McGonigle is stricter 'n I am."

Winfield was greatly impressed by the fame of his passenger. He carried Calphurnia; no harm could come to him. They crossed Fifth Street at such a pace that the car-tracks sent Sheila aloft. As she came down she remembered Officer McGonigle. She saw that he or a vague film of him was saluting her with admiring awe.

The grinding toil of the stock actress has its perquisites, after all.

She made Winfield let her out at the alley and ran with all her might. Once more she was met at the stage door by the anxious Eldon. But now she resented his presence. His solicitude resembled espionage. But it was not he that had changed.

Pennock was in a furious mood and scolded Sheila roundly when she helped her into her costume at a speed a fireman would have envied. As she made up her face while Pennock concocted her hair, Sheila was studying some new lines that Vickery had determined to try out that afternoon.

The performance went excellently well. Sheila was refreshed by her sleep and the forced ventilation her soul had had. She dined with Vickery and Winfield. Vickery was aflame with new ideas that had come to him in Winfield's car. He had dropped out, not to leave them alone, but to be alone with his precious thoughts.

Sheila's ambitions, however, were asleep. She was more interested in the silent admiration of Winfield. The light on his glasses kept her from seeing his eyes, but she felt that they were soft upon her, because his voice was gentle when he spoke the few words he said.

It irritated Sheila to have to hurry back to the theater after dinner to repeat again the afternoon's repetition. The moon seemed to call down the alley to her not to give herself to the garish ache of the calcium; and the breeze had fingers twitching at her clothes and a voice that sang, "Come walk with me."

She played the play, but it irked her. When she left the theater at half past eleven she found Winfield waiting, in his car. Vickery was walking at her side, jabbering about his eternal revisions. Winfield offered to carry them to their hotels. He saw to it that he reached Vickery's first. When they had dropped Jonah overboard

Winfield asked Sheila to take just a bit of the air for her health's sake.

She hesitated only a moment. The need of a chaperon hardly occurred to her. She had been living a life of independence for months. She had no fear of Winfield or of anybody. Had she not overpowered the ferocious Reben? She consented—for the sake of her health.

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE will always be two schools of preventive hygiene for women. One would protect girls from themselves and their suitors by high walls, ignorance, seclusion, and a guardian in attendance at every step. The other would protect them by encouraging high ideals through knowledge, self-respect, liberty, and industry.

Neither school ever succeeded altogether, or ever will. The fault of the former is that what is forbidden becomes desirable; high walls are scalable, ignorance dangerous, seclusion impossible, and guardians either corruptible or careless.

The fault of the latter is that emotions alter ideals and subdue them to their own color; that knowledge increases curiosity, self-respect may be overpowered or undermined, and that liberty enlarges opportunity.

It always comes back to the individual occasion and the individual soul in conflict with it. There has been much viciousness in harems and in more sacred inclosures. And there has been much virtue in dual solitudes. Liberty is not salvation, but at least it encourages intelligence, it enforces responsibility, and it avoids the infinite evils of tyranny. For that reason, while actresses and other women are not always so good as they might be, they are not often so bad as they might be.

Sheila, the actress, was put upon her mettle. She had no duenna to play tricks upon. She had herself to take care of, her preciousness to waste or cherish. Sometimes women respond to these encounters with singular dignity: sometimes with singular indifference.

The town of Clinton was almost all asleep. The very houses seemed tucked up in sheeted moonlight. And soon Sheila and her cavalier—or engineer—were beyond the point where the streets were subtly changed to roads. The last car on the suburban line growled and glittered past, lurching noisily on its squealing rails. And then they were alone under the moony vastitude of sky, with the dream-drenched earth revolving around them in a huge, slow wheel.

The car purred with the contentment of a great house-cat and lapped up the glimmering road like a stream of milk.

Sheila felt the spirit of the night, and felt that all the universe was in tender rapport with itself. She felt as never before the grace of love, the desire, the need of love. For years she had been exerting herself for her ambition, and now her ambition was tired. The hour of womanhood was striking, almost silently, yet as unmistakably as the distant town clock that published midnight, so far away as to be less overheard than felt in the slow throb of the air.

Bret Winfield's response to the mood of the night was pagan. Sheila was a mighty nice girl and darned pretty and she had consented to take a midnight spin with him. But many darned pretty girls had done the same. A six-cylinder motor-car is a very winsome form of invitation.

In place of inviting a young man to a cozy corner in a parlor or a hammock on a piazza, the enterprising maiden of the day accepts his invitation—and seats herself in a flying hammock. Seclusion is secured and concealment attained by way of velocity.

A wonderful change had taken place in the world of lovers in the last ten years. For thousands of years before—ever since, indeed, the first man invented the taming of the first horse and took his cave-girl buggy-riding on a pair of poles or in a square-wheeled cart—lovers had been

kept to about the same pace. Suddenly they were given a buggy that can go sixty miles an hour or better; so fast, indeed, that it is veiled in its own speed and its own dust. Even the naughty gods and the goddesses of Homer never knew any concealment like it.

Winfield was an average young man who had known average young women averagely well. He had found that demoiselles either would not motor with him at all or, motoring with him, expected to be paid certain gallant attentions. He always tried to live up to their expectations. They might struggle, but never fiercely enough to endanger the steering-wheel. They might protest, but never loudly enough to drown the engine.

Such was his experience with the laity. Sheila was his first actress, not including a few encounters with those camp-followers of the theater who are only accepted as "actresses" when they are arrested, and who have as much right to the name as washwomen for a convent have the right to be called "nuns," when they drink too much.

But Winfield had reasoned that if the generality of pretty girls who motored with men were prepared for dalliance, by so much more would an actress be. Consequently, when he reached a hilltop where there was a good excuse for pausing to admire the view of a moon-plated river laid along a dark valley, he shut off the power and slid his left arm back of Sheila.

She sat forward promptly and his heart began to chug.

Making love is an old and foolish game, but strangely exciting at the time. Winfield was more afraid to withdraw his arm than to complete the embrace.

Sheila's heart was spinning, too. She had thrilled to the love-croon of the night. The landscape before her and beneath her seemed to be filled with dreams. But she was in love with love and not with Bret Winfield.

When she recognized that he was about to begin to initiate her by a familiar form of amorous hazing into the

ancient society whose emblem is a spoon, she abruptly decided that she did not want to belong. Winfield became abruptly more of a stranger than ever.

Sheila did not want to hate this nice young man. She did not want to quarrel with her chauffeur so far from home at so compromising an hour. She did not want to wreck the heavenly night with idiotic combat. She hated the insincerity and perfunctoriness that must be the effect of any protest. She was actress enough to realize that the lines the situation required of her had long ago lost their effectiveness and their very sincerity.

But she did not want to be hugged. She loathed the thought of being touched by this man's arm. She felt herself as precious and her body as holy as the lofty emotion of the night. Still, how could she protest till he gave her cause? He gave her cause.

Her very shoulder-blades winced as she felt Winfield's arm close about her; she shivered as his big hand folded over her shoulder.

Sheila groped for appropriate words. Winfield's big handsome face with the two dim lenses over his eyes was brought nearer and nearer to her cheek. Then, without giving him even the help of resistance, she inquired, quite casually:

"Is it true that they can send you to the penitentiary if you hit a man in the face when he's wearing glasses?"

Sheila was as astounded as Winfield was at this most unexpected query. His lips paused at her very cheek to stammer:

"I don't know. But why? What about it?"

"Because if it is true I want you either to take your arm away or take your glasses off."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to. All you have to understand is that I don't want your arm around me. I'd rather go to the penitentiary than have you kiss me."

"For the Lord's sake!" Winfield gasped, relaxing his clutch.

Sheila went on with that sarcasm which is cold poison to romance: "I don't blame you for attempting it. I know it's the usual thing on such occasions. But I don't like it, and that ought to be enough."

Winfield sighed with shame and regret. "It's quite enough! I beg your pardon very humbly. Shall we turn back now?"

"If you please."

The very engine seemed to groan as Winfield started it up again. It clucked reprovingly, "Ts! ts! ts!"

Winfield was more angry than sorry. He had made a fool of himself and she had made another fool of him. He was young enough to grumble a little, "Are you in love with that man Eldon?"

"He's very nice."

"You love him, then?"

"Not at all."

"Well, then, if you keep me at such a distance, why do you—how can you let him put his arms round you and kiss you twice a day before everybody?"

"He gets paid for it, and so do I."

"That makes it worse."

"You think so? Well, I don't. Actors are like doctors. They have special privileges to do things that would be very wrong for other people."

Winfield laughed this to scorn. Sheila was furious.

"If there weren't any actors there wouldn't be any Shakespeare or any of the great plays. Doctors save people from death and disease. Actors save millions from melancholy and from loneliness, and teach them sympathy and understanding. So it is perfectly proper for an actress to be kissed and hugged on the stage. Acting is the noblest profession in the world, the humanest and the most fascinating. And a woman can do just as much good and be just as good on the stage as she can

anywhere else. If you don't think so, then you have no right to speak to an actress. And I don't want you to speak to me again—ever! for you come with an insult in your heart. You despise me and I despise you."

Winfield was in a panic. He had sought this girl out to square himself with her, and he had wounded her deeper than before.

"Oh, please, Miss Kemble, I beg you!" he pleaded. "I don't blame you for despising me, but I don't despise you. I think you are wonderful. I'm simply crazy about you. I never saw a girl I—I liked so much. I didn't mean anything wrong, and I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I just thought—"

Sheila felt a little relentment. "I know what you thought, and I suppose I oughtn't to blame you. Actresses ought to get used to being misunderstood, just as trained nurses are. But I hoped you were different. I know I am. I've had so much stage loving that it doesn't mean anything to me. When I get the real I want it to be twice as real as it would have to be for anybody else. Just because I pretend so much I'd have to be awfully in love to love at all."

"Haven't you ever loved anybody?" Winfield asked, quite inanely.

She shook her head and answered, with a foolish solemnity. "I thought I was going to, once or twice, but I never did."

"That's just like me. I've never really loved anybody, either."

There was such unqualified juvenility in their words that they recognized it themselves. Sheila could not help laughing. He laughed, too, like a cub.

Then Sheila said, with the earnestness of a child playing doll's house: "You're too young to love anybody, and I haven't time yet. I've got much too much work ahead of me to waste any time on love."

"I've got a lot of work ahead of me, too," said Winfield.

"You have?" said Sheila. "What is your work—doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief?"

She was surprised to realize that she had come to know this man pretty well before she knew anything at all about him. She was discussing Winfield's future before she had heard of his past. Vickery's introduction had been his only credentials, his only history. And yet she had already rested briefly in his arms. She was surprised further when he said:

"I'm a— That is, my father is— We are Winfield's Scales."

She took this so blankly that he gasped, "Good heavens! didn't you ever hear of Winfield's Scales?"

"I never did," said Sheila.

"I'll bet you were weighed in one of 'em when you were born."

"I couldn't read when I was born," said Sheila.

"And you've never heard of them since?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Winfield shook his head amiably over her childlike ignorance. But then, what information could one expect of theatrical people? He went on:

"Well, anyway, my father is one of the biggest manufacturers of scales and weighing-machines and such things that there is. He's about the only independent one left out of the trust. Haven't you heard of the tremendous fight we've been putting up?"

Sheila was less interested in the war than in the soldier.

"We?" she said.

"Well, I'm not in the firm yet, but my father expects me to step in right away, so that he can step out. He's not very well. That makes him rather cranky. He didn't want me to come down here, but I wanted to see Vickery's play and square myself with you. And I've made a mess of that."

"Oh no! we're square now, I fancy," said Sheila.

"Then I ought to be at home," he sighed.

"Instead of sowing wild oats with actresses," said Sheila.

"These oats are not very wild," Winfield grumbled, not quite cured of regret.

"Rather tame, eh?" Sheila laughed. "Well, you'll find that most actresses are. We're such harness-broken, heart-broken hacks, most of us, there's not much excitement left in us. So you're to be a scale manufacturer. You're awfully rich, I suppose."

"When the market's good, Dad makes a pile of money. When it's bad—whew! And it's expensive fighting the trust."

"Is it anything like the theatrical trust?"

"Is there a theatrical trust?"

"Good heavens! Haven't you read about the war?"

"Was there a war?"

"For years. Millions of dollars were involved."

"Is that so?"

"Why, yes! and Reben was right in the thick of it. Both sides were trying to get him in."

"Who's Reben?" said Winfield. "What does he manufacture?"

Sheila laughed, shocked at his boundless ignorance. It was like asking, "What does St. Peter do for a living?"

"You don't know much about the theater, do you?"

"No," he laughed, "and you don't know much about weighing-machines."

"No."

"Neither do I. I've got to learn."

"Then you'd better be hurrying home. I wouldn't for worlds interfere with your career."

She felt quite grandmotherly as she said it. She did not look it, though, and as he stole a glance at her beauty, all demure and moonlike in the moon, he sighed: "But I can't bear to leave you just as I'm beginning to—" he wanted to say "to love you," but he had not prepared for the word, so he said, "to get acquainted with you."

She understood his unspoken phrase and it saddened her. But she continued to be very old and extremely sage. "It's too bad; but we'll meet again, perhaps."

"That's so, I suppose. Well, all right, we'll be sensible."

And so, like two extremely good children, they put away temptation and closed the door of the jam-closet. Who can be solemner than youth at this frivolous age? What can solemnize solemnity like putting off till to-morrow the temptation of to-day?

The moment Sheila and Winfield sealed up love in a preserve-jar and labeled it, "Not to be opened till Christmas," and shelved it, that love became unutterably desirable.

Nothing that they could have resolved, nothing that any one else could have advised them, could have mutually endeared them so instantly and so pathetically as their earnest decision that they must not let themselves grow dear to each other.

They finished their ride back in silence, leaving behind them a moon that seemed to drag at their flying shoulders with silver grappling-hooks. The air was humming forbidden music in their ears and the locked-up houses seemed to order them to remain abroad.

But he drew up at her little apartment-hotel and took her to the door, where a sleepy night-clerk-plus-elevator-boy opened the locked door for her and went back to sleep.

Sheila and Winfield defied the counsel of the night by primly shaking hands. Sheila spoke as if she were leaving a formal reception.

"Thank you ever so much for the lovely ride. And—er— Well, good night—or, rather good-by, for I suppose you'll be leaving to-morrow."

"I ought to," he groaned, dubiously. "Good night! Good-by!"

He climbed in, waved his hat to her, and she her gloves

at him. Far down the street he turned again to stare back and to wave farewell again. He could not see her, but she was there, mystically sorrowing at the lost opportunity of happiness, the unheeded advice of nature—in the mood of Paul Bourget's elegy as Debussy set it to music:

"*Un conseil d'être heureux semble sortir des choses*
Et monter vers le cœur troublé,
Un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au monde
Cependant qu'on est jeune et que le soir est beau;
Car nous nous en allons, comme s'en va cette onde—
Elle à la mer, nous au tombeau."

CHAPTER XXVII

WINFIELD had said, "I ought to!" It is strange that we always say "I ought to" with skepticism, wondering both "Shall I?" and "Will I?" If our selves are our real gods, we are all agnostics.

The next morning Sheila woke with less than her yester joy. Leisure was not so much a luxury and more of a bore. Not that she felt regret for the lack of rehearsals. She was not interested in plays, but in the raw material of plays, and she was not so proud of her noble renunciation of Bret Winfield as she had been.

To fight off her new loneliness she decided to go shopping. When men are restless they go to clubs or billiard-parlors or saloons. Women go prowling through the shops. The Clinton shops were as unpromising to Sheila as a man's club in summer. But there was no other way to kill time.

As she set out she saw Bret Winfield's car loafing in front of her hotel. He was sitting in it. The faces of both showed a somewhat dim surprise. Sheila quickened her steps to the curb, where he hastened to alight.

"You didn't go," she said, brilliantly.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I—I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Well, I didn't sleep a wink last night, and—"

"I didn't close my eyes, either."

It was a perfectly sincere statement on both sides and perfectly untrue in both cases. Both had slept enviably

most of the time they thought they were awake. Sheila tried to make conversation:

"What was on your mind?"

"You!"

His words filled her with delicious fright. On the lofty hill under the low-hanging moon he had scared love off by attempted caresses. With one word he brought love back in a rose-clouded mantle that gave their communion a solitude there on the noisy street with the cars brawling by and the crowds passing and peering, people nudging and whispering: "That's her! That's Sheila Kemble! Ain't she pretty? She's just grand in the new show! Saw it yet?"

They stood in gawky speechlessness till he said, "Which way you going?"

"I have some shopping to do."

"Oh! Too bad. I was going to ask you to take a little spin."

They span.

Winfield did not leave Clinton till the week was gone and Sheila with it. They were together constantly, making little efforts at concealment that attracted all manner of attention in the whole jealous town.

Vickery and Eldon were not the least alive to Winfield's incursion into Sheila's thoughts. Both regarded it as nothing less than a barbaric danger. Both felt that Winfield, for all his good qualities, was a Philistine. They knew that he had little interest in the stage as an institution, and no reverence for it. It was to him an amusement at best, and a scandal at worst.

But to Vickery the theater was the loftiest form of literary publication, and to Eldon it was the noblest forum of human debate. To both of them Sheila was as a high priestess at an altar. They felt that Winfield wanted to lure her or drag her away from the temple to an old-fashioned home where her individuality would be

merged in her husband's manufacturing interests, and her histrionism would be confined to an audience of one, or to the entertainment of her own children.

This feeling was entirely apart from the love that both of them felt for Sheila the woman. Each was sure in his heart that his own love for Sheila was far the greatest of the three loves.

Vickery forgot even his own vain struggles to make the heroine of his play behave, in his eagerness to save Sheila from ruining the dramatic unity of her life by interpolating a commercial marriage as the third act. He found a chance to speak to her one afternoon just before the second curtain rose. He was as excited as if he had been making a curtain speech and nearly as awkward:

"Sheila," he hemmed and hawed, "I want to speak to you very frankly about Bret. Of course, he's a splendid fellow and a friend I'm very fond of, but if he goes and makes you fall in love with him I'll break his head."

"He's bigger than you are," Sheila laughed.

"Yes," Vickery admitted, "but there are clubs that are harder than even his hard head. If he takes you off the stage I'll never forgive myself for introducing him to you. I'll never forgive him, either—or you. In Heaven's name, Sheila, don't let him take you off the stage. I've heard of hitching your wagon to a star, but this would be hitching a star to a wagon. I can't ask you to marry me for the Lord knows how long; even assuming that you would consider me if I had a million instead of being a penniless playwright; but I at least would try to help you on in your career. I'd rather you wouldn't marry either of us than marry him."

Sheila chuckled luxuriously: "Don't you lose any sleep over me, Vick. In the first place, Mr. Winfield has never even suggested that I should marry him."

Which was fact.

"In the second place, if he did I should decline him with thanks."

Which was prophecy.

Vickery was so relieved that he returned to the discussion of his play. He promised to have it ready for fall rehearsals. Sheila assured him that she would be ready whenever the play was. Then her cue came and she walked into her laboratory, while Vickery hastened out front to study the effect of his new lines on the audience.

When Sheila issued from her dressing-room for the third act, in which she did not appear for some time after the curtain was up, she found Eldon waiting for her. He was suffering as from stage-fright, and he delivered the lines he had been rehearsing in his dressing-room nearly as badly as the lines he had forgotten the night he played the farmer with the dark lantern. The substance of what he jumbled was this:

"Sheila, I want to speak very frankly to you. Don't take it for mere jealousy, though you have hardly looked at me since Mr. Vickery and the Winfield fellow struck town. I don't suppose you care for me any more, but I beg you not to let anybody take you off the stage. You belong. You have the God-given gifts. Your success proves where your duty to yourself lies.

"If you can't marry me and you must marry some one, marry our author. It would break my heart, but I'd rather he'd have you than anybody but me, for he'd keep you where you belong, anyway. I suppose this Winfield has some extraordinary charms for you. He seems a nice enough fellow and he'll come into a heap of money. But if I thought there was any danger of his carrying you off, I'd knock him so far out of the theater that he'd never—"

Sheila was bristling up to say that two could play at the same game, but Eldon had heard his signal for entrance, and, leaving his gloomy earnestness in the wings, he breezed on to the stage with all imaginable flippancy. He came off just as gaily a little later, only to resume his

sobriety and his speech the moment he passed the sideline:

"As I was saying, Sheila, I implore you not to ruin your life by marrying that man."

Sheila had many things to say, but her actress self had heard the approach of her cue, and she spoke hastily: "You are worrying yourself needlessly, Floyd. In the first place, Mr. Winfield has never even suggested that I should marry him; in the second place, if he did, I'd decline with—"

And then she slipped into the scene and became the creature of Vickery's fancy.

On Saturday night the house-manager gave a farewell supper to Sheila on the stage and naturally failed to include Winfield in the invitations. He sulked about the somnolent town in a dreadful fit of loneliness, but he could not get a word with Sheila. Sheila, now that she was leaving the company, felt a mingling of fondness for the shabby old stage and the workaday troupe and of happiness at being pardoned out of the penitentiary.

On the morrow Winfield asked her by telephone if he might take her to the train in his car. She consented. She was late getting ready, and he had to go at high speed, with no chance for farewell conversation. As they reached the station his agony at leaving her wrenched from him a desperate plea:

"Won't you kiss me Good-by?"

In the daylight, among the unromantic hacks, she laughed at the thought:

"Kiss you *Good-by?* Why, I haven't kissed you *How-d'-do?* yet!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN Sheila reached the home of her father and mother she spent her first few days renewing her kinship with them. They seemed older to her, but they had not aged as she had. They had been through just one more season. She had passed through an epoch.

They found her mightily changed. They were proud of her. They could see that she had taken good care of her body. They knew that she had succeeded in her art. They wondered what she had done with her soul. They had reached that thrilling, horribly anxious state of parentage when the girl child is grown to a woman and when every step is dangerous. Authority is ended; advice is untranslatable, and the parents become only spectators at a play whose star they have provided but whose cast they cannot select.

Sheila was not troubled about these things. Her chief excitement was in the luxury of having her afternoons to herself and every evening free. She was like a night-watchman on a vacation. It was wonderful to be her own mistress from twilight to midnight. She had no make-up to put on except for the eyes of the sun. There were no footlights. The only need for attention to her skin was to fight off sunburn and the attacks of the surf in which she spent hours upon hours.

The business of her neighbors and herself was improvising hilarities: the sea, the motors, saddle-horses, tennis, golf, watching polo-games, horse-races, airship-races, all the summer industries of Long Island.

The Kembles had a wide and easy acquaintance with

the aristocracy. Roger and Polly forgot, if the others did not, that they were stage folk. They enjoyed the elegancies of life and knew how to be familiar without being vulgar. Sheila inherited their acquaintance and had been bred to their graces.

Young women and old of social importance made the girl one of their intimates. Any number of more or less nice young plutocrats offered to lead her along the primrose path as far as she would go. But she compelled respect, perhaps with a little extra severity for the sake of her maligned profession. Before many days she would have to return to it, but she was in no hurry.

One morning in the sun-flailed surf she grew weary of the jigging crowd of rope-dancers. Seeing that one of the floats was empty, she swam out to it. It was more of a journey than she thought, for we judge distances as walkers, not as swimmers. She climbed aboard with difficulty and rested, staring out to sea, the boundless sea where big waves came bowing in, nodding their white feathers.

She heard some one else swimming up, but did not look around. She did not want to talk to any of the men she had swum away from. She felt the float tilt as whoever it was sprang from the water and seated himself, dripping. Then she heard a voice with all the morning in it:

"Good morning!"

"Bret Winfield!" she cried, as she whirled on one hip like a mermaid.

"Sheila Kemble!" he laughed.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"I'm not on earth; I'm alone in midocean with you."

"But what brought you? Where did you come from?"

"Home. I just couldn't stand it."

"Stand what?"

"Being away from you."

"Good heavens!"

"It's been the other place to me."

"Really?"

"I told Dad I needed a rest; that something was the matter with my mind. He admitted that, but blamed it to lack of use. Then I ducked. I shipped my car to New York, and flew down the Motor Parkway to here. Got here yesterday. Been hanging round, trying to find you alone. Swell chance! There's a swarm after you all the time, isn't there?"

"Is there?"

"Last night I saw you dancing at the hotel with every Tom, Dick, and Harry. I hoped you'd come out and sit on the piazza so that I could sandbag the man and carry you off. But you didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

"I didn't care to be alone with any of them."

"Lord bless your sweet soul! Were you thinking of me?"

"Not necessarily."

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Oh yes. The more the merrier."

This impudence brought his high hopes down. But they soared again when she said, with charming inconsistency:

"Dog-on it! here comes somebody!"

A fat man who somewhat resembled the globular figures cartoonists use to represent the world, wallowed out, splashing like a side-wheel raft-boat. He tried to climb aboard, but his equator was too wide for his short arms, and neither Sheila nor Winfield offered to lend him a hand. He gave up and propelled himself back to shore with the grace of a bell-buoy.

"Good-by, old flotsam and jetsam," said Winfield.

Sheila could not but note the difference between the other man and Winfield. There was every opportunity for observation in both cases. Each inly acknowledged that the other was perfection physically. Each wished

to be able to observe the other's soul in equal completeness of display. But that power was denied them.

It would have served them little to know each other's souls, since happiness in love is not a question of individual perfections, but of their combination and what results from it. Fire and water are excellent in their place, but brought together, the result is familiar—either the water changes the flame to sodden ashes, or the flame changes the water to steam. Both lose their qualities, change unrecognizably.

In any case, Winfield courted Sheila with all the impetuous stubbornness of his nature. He had no visible rivals to fight, but the affair was not denied the added charm of danger.

One blistering day, when all of the populace that could slid off the hot land into the water like half-baked amphibians, Sheila and Winfield plunged into the nearest fringe of surf. The beach was like Broadway when the matinées let out. They swam to the float. It was as crowded as a seal-rock with sirens, sea-leopards, sea-cows, walruses, dugongs, and manatees. There was no room for Sheila till an obliging faun gallantly offered her his seat and dived from the raft more graciously than gracefully, for he smacked the water flatly in what is known as a belly-buster or otherwise. He nearly swamped her in his back-wash.

She felt a longing for the outer solitudes and, when she had rested and breathed a few times, she struck out for the open sea beyond the ropes. Winfield followed her gaily and they reveled in the life of mer-man and mer-girl till suddenly she realized that she was tired.

Forgetting where she was, she attempted to stand up. She thrust her feet down into a void. There is hardly a more hideous sensation, or a more terrifying, for an inexpert swimmer. She went under with a gasp and came up choking.

Winfield was just diving into a big wave and did not

see her. The same wave caught Sheila by the back of her head and held her face down, then swept on, leaving her strangling and smitten into a panic. She struck out for shore with all awkwardness, as if robbed of experience with the water.

Winfield turned to her, and sang, "A life on the bounding waves for me." An ugly, snarling breaker whelmed her again, and a third found her unready and cowering before its toppling wall. She called Winfield by his first name for the first time:

"Bret, I can't get back."

He crept to her side with all his speed, and spoke soothing words: "You poor child! of course you can."

"I—I'm afraid."

A massive green billow flung on her a crest like a cart-load of paving-stones, and sent her spinning, bewildered. Winfield just heard her moan:

"I give up."

He clutched her sleeve as she drooped under the petty wave that succeeded. He tried to remember what the books and articles said, but he had never saved anybody and he was only an ordinary swimmer himself.

He swam on his side, reaching out with one hand and dragging her with the other. But helplessly he kicked her delicate body and she floated face downward. He turned on his back and, suddenly remembering the instructions, put his hands in her armpits and lifted her head above all but the ripple-froth, propelling himself with his feet alone.

But his progress was dismally slow, and he could not see where he was going. The laughter of the bathers and their shrieks as the breakers charged in among them grew fainter. A longshore current was haling them away from the crowds. The life-savers were busy hoisting a big woman into their boat and everybody was watching the rescue. Nobody had missed Sheila. Her own father and mother were whooping like youngsters in the surf.

Winfield twisted his head and tried to make out his course, but his dim eyes could not see so far without the glasses he had left at the boat-house; and the light on the water was blinding.

He was tired and dismayed. He rested for a while, then struck out till he must rest again. At last he spoke to her: "Sheila."

"Yes, dear."

"You'll have to help me. I can't see far enough."

"You poor boy!" she cried. "Tell me what to do."

"Can you put your hands on my shoulders, and tell me which way to swim? I'm all turned round."

He drew her to him, and revolved her and set her hands on his shoulders, then turned his back to her, and swam with all-fours. She floated out above him like a mantle, and, holding her head high, directed him. She was his eyes, and he was her limbs, and thus curiously twinned they fought their way through the alien element.

The sea seemed to want them for its own. It attacked them with waves that went over them with the roar of railroad trains. Beneath, the icy undertow gripped at his feet. His lungs hurt him so that he felt that death would be a lesser ache than breathing.

Sheila's weight, for all the lightness the water gave it, threatened to drown them both. But her words were full of help. In his behalf she put into her voice more cheer than she found in her heart. The shore seemed rather to recede than to approach.

Now and then she would call aloud for help, but the salt-water had weakened her throat and there was always some new sensation ashore.

At length, Winfield could hear the crash of the breakers and at length Sheila was telling him that they were almost in. Again and again he stabbed downward for a footing and found none. Eventually, however, he felt the blessed foundation of the world beneath him and, turn-

ing, caught Sheila about the waist and thrust her forward till she too could stand.

The beach was bad where they landed and the baffled waters dragged at their trembling legs like ropes, but they made onward to the dry sand. They fell down, panting, aghast, and stared at the innocent sea, where joyous billows came in like young men running with their hands aloft. Far to their left the mob shrieked and cavorted. Farther away to their right the next colony of maniacs cavorted and shrieked.

When breathing was less like swallowing swords they looked at each other, smiled with sickly lips, and clasped cold, shriveled hands.

"Well," said Sheila, "you saved my life, didn't you?"

"No," he answered; "you saved mine."

She gave him a pale-blue smile and, as the chill seized her, she spoke, with teeth knocking together, "We s-saved dea-dea chother."

"Ye-yes," he ch-chattered, "so w-we bu-bu-bu-bulong to wea-weachother."

"All r-r-right-t-t-t."

That was his proposal and her acceptance. They rose and clasped hands and ran for the bath-house, while agues of rapture made scroll-work of their outlines. They had escaped from dying together, but they were not to escape from living together.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE betrothed couple had no opportunity to seal the engagement with the usual ceremonies. When they met again, fully clothed, she was so late to her luncheon that she had to fly.

Already, after their high tragedy and their rosy romance, the little things of existence were asserting their importance. That afternoon Sheila had an engagement that she could not get out of, and a dinner afterward. She had booked these dates without dreaming of what was to happen.

It was not till late in the evening that Sheila could steal away to Winfield, who stole across the lawn to her piazza by appointment.

The scene was perfectly set. An appropriate moon was in her place. The breeze was exquisitely aromatic. Winfield was in summer costume of dinner-suit and straw hat. Sheila was in a light evening gown with no hat.

They cast hasty glances about, against witnesses, and then he flung his arms around her, and she flung hers around him. He crushed her as fiercely as he dared, and she him as fiercely as she could. Their lips met in the great kiss of betrothal.

She was happy beyond endurance. She was in love and her beloved loved her.

All the Sheilas there were in her soul agreed for once that she was happy to the final degree, contented beyond belief, imparadised on earth. The Sheilas voted unanimously that love was life; love was the greatest thing in the world; that woman's place was with her lover, that

a woman's forum was the home; and that any career outside the walls was a plaything to be put away and forgotten like a hobby-horse outgrown.

As for her stage career—pouf! into the attic with it where her little tin house and the tiny tin kitchen and her knitted bear and the glueless dolls reposed. She was going to have a real house and real children and real life.

While she was consigning her ambitions to the old trunk up-stairs, Winfield was refurbishing his ambitions. He was going to do work enough for two, be ambitious for both and make Sheila the proudest wife of the busiest husband in the husband business.

But these great resolutions were mainly roaring in the back parlors of their brains. On the piazzas of their lips were words of lovers' nonsense. There is no use quoting them. They would sound silly even to those who have used them themselves.

They sounded worse than that to Roger and Polly, who heard them all.

Roger and Polly had come home from dancing half an hour before, and had dropped into chairs in the living-room. The moon on the sea was dazzling. They watched it through the screens that strained the larger mosquitoes. then they put out the lights because the view was better and because enough mosquitoes were already in the house.

The conversation of the surf had made all the necessary language and Roger and Polly sat in the tacit comfort of long-married couples. They had heard Sheila brought home by a young man whom she dismissed with brevity. Before they found energy to call to her, another young man had hurried across the grass. To their intense amazement he leaped at Sheila and she did not scream. Both merged into one silhouette.

Polly and Roger were aghast, but they dared not speak. They did not even know who the man was. Sheila called him by no name to identify him, though she called him by any number of names of intense saccharinity.

At length Roger's voice came through the gloom, as gentle as a shaft of moonlight made audible: "Oh, Sheila."

The silhouette was snipped in two as if by scissors.

"Ye-yes, dodther." She had tried to say "Daddy" and "father" at the same time.

Roger's voice went on in its drawing-roomest drawl: "I know that it is very bad play-writing to have anybody overhear anybody, but your mother and I got home first, and your dialogue is—well, really, a little of it goes a great way, and we'd like to know the name of your leading man."

Winfield and Sheila both wished that they had drowned that morning. But there was no escape from making their entrance into the living-room, where Roger turned on the lights. All eyes blinked, rather with confusion than the electric display.

The elder Kembles had met Winfield before, but had not suspected him as a son-in-law-to-be. Sheila explained the situation and laid heavy stress on how Winfield had rescued her from drowning. She rather gave the impression that she had fallen off a liner two days out and that he had jumped overboard and carried her to safety single-handed.

Winfield tried to disclaim the glory, but he managed to gulp up a proposal in phrases he had read somewhere.

"I came to ask you for your daughter's hand."

"It looked to me as if you had both of them around your neck," Roger sighed. Then he cleared his throat and said: "What do you say, Polly? Do we give our consent?—not that it makes any difference."

Polly sighed. "Sheila's happiness is the only thing to consider."

"Ah, Sheila's happiness!" Roger groaned. "That's a large order. I suppose she has told you, Mr. Wyndham, that she is an actress—or is trying to be?"

"Oh yes, sir," Winfield answered, feeling like a butler asking for a position. "I fell in love with her on the stage."

"Ah, so you are an actor, too."

"Oh no, sir! I'm a manufacturer, or I expect to be."

"And is your factory one that can be carried around with you, or does Sheila intend—"

"Oh, { I'm / she's } going to leave the stage."

"Hum!" said Roger. "When?"

"Right away, I hope," said Winfield.

"I'm off the stage now," said Sheila. "I'll just not go back."

"I see," said Roger, while Polly stared from her idolized child to the terrifying stranger, and wrung her hands before the appalling explosion of this dynamite in the quiet evening.

"Well, mummsy," Sheila cried, taking her mother in her arms, "why don't you say something?"

"I—I don't know what to say," Polly whimpered.

Roger's uneasy eyes were attracted by the living-room table, where there was a comfortable clutter of novels and magazines. A copy of *The Munsey* was lying there; it was open, face down. Roger picked it up and offered the open book to Sheila.

She and Winfield looked down at a full-page portrait of Sheila.

"Had you seen this, Mr.—Mr.—Wingate, is it? It's a forecast of the coming season and it says—it says—" He produced his eye-glasses and read:

"'The most interesting announcement among the Reben plans is the statement that Sheila Kemble is to be promoted to stellar honors in a new play written especially for her. While we deplore the custom of rushing half-baked young beauties into the electric letters, an exception must be made in the case of this rising young artist. She has not only revealed extraordinary accomplishments and won for herself a great following of admirers throughout the country, but she has also enjoyed a double heritage in the gifts of her distinguished forebears, who are no less personages than'—et cetera, et cetera."

Sheila and Winfield stared at the page from which Sheila's public image beamed quizzically at herself and at the youth who aspired to rob her "great following" of their darling.

"What about that?" said Roger.

Winfield looked so pitiful to Sheila that she cried, "Well, my 'great following' will have to follow somebody else, for I belong to Bret now."

"I see," said Roger. "And when does the rising young star—er—set? When does the marriage take place?"

"Whenever Bret wants me," said Sheila, and she added "Ooh!" for he squeezed her fingers with merciless gratitude.

"Oh, Sheila! Sheila!" said Polly, clutching at her other hand as if she would hold her little girl back from crossing the stile of womanhood.

Roger hummed several times in the greatest possible befuddlement. At length he said:

"And what do your parents say, Mr. Winston?—or are they—er—living?"

"Yes, sir, both of them, thank you. They don't know anything about it yet, sir."

"And do you think they will be pleased?"

"When they know Sheila they can't help loving her."

"It has happened, I believe," said Roger, "that parents have not altogether echoed their children's enthusiasms. And there are still a few people who would not consider a popular actress an ideal daughter-in-law."

"Oh, they won't make any trouble!" said Winfield. "They ought to be proud of—of an alliance with such—er—distinguished forebears as you." He tried to include Polly and Roger in one look, and he thought the tribute rather graceful.

Roger smiled at the bungled compliment and answered, "Well, the Montagues and the Capulets were both prominent families, but that didn't help Romeo and Juliet much."

Winfield writhed at Roger's light sarcasm. "It doesn't matter what they say. I am of age."

"So I judge, but have you an income of your own?"

"No, but— Well, I can take care of Sheila, I guess!" He was angry now.

Roger rather liked him for his bluster, but he said, "In any case there is no especial hurry, I presume."

To the young lovers there seemed to be the most enormous necessity of haste to forsake the world and build their own nest in their own tree.

Roger was silent and Polly was silent. Winfield felt called upon to speak. At last he managed to extort a few words from his embarrassment:

"Anyway, I can count on your consent, can I?"

"Our consent!" laughed Roger. "What have we to say? We're only the parents of a young American princess. If Sheila says yes, your next trouble is your own parents, for you are only an American man."

"Anyway, you won't oppose us?" Winfield urged.

"My boy, I would no more oppose Sheila than I would oppose the Twentieth Century Limited in full flight."

Sheila pouted. "That's nice! Now he'll think I'm something terrible."

Roger put his arm about his daughter, who was nearly taller than he was. "My child," he said, "I think you are the finest woman in the world except your own mother. And if it would make you happy and keep you happy I'd cut off my right arm." Then he kissed her, and his eyes were more like a sorrowful boy's than a father's. There was a lull in the conversation and he escaped with the words: "Mother, it's time for the old folks to go to bed. The young people have a lot to talk over and we're in the way. Good night, Mr. Win—my boy, and good luck to you—though God alone knows good luck when He sees it."

When the veterans had climbed the stairs to the shelf on which younger romance had put them, Bret and

Sheila resumed that interrupted embrace, but deliberately and solemnly. It was a serious matter, this getting married and all.

The next morning brought a flood of sunlight on an infinitely cheerful ocean and the two lovers' thoughts flew to each other from their remote windows like carrier-pigeons.

Sheila was perturbed, and as she watched Winfield approach she thought that his very motor seemed to be a trifle sullen. Then she ran down to the piazza to meet him. She carried a letter in her left hand. She waved him welcome with the other.

As he ran up the walk he took from his pocket a telegram. They vanished into the house to exchange appropriate salutes, but Pennock was there as housemaid, and she was giving orders to Roger's valet, who doubled as the butler in summer-time.

So they returned to the porch embraceless. This began the morning wrong. Then Winfield handed Sheila his telegram, a long night letter from his father, saying that his health was bad and he might have to take a rest. He added, vigorously:

"You've fooled away time enough. Get back on the job; learn your business and attend to it."

Winfield shook his head dolefully. "Isn't that rotten?"

"Mate it with this," said Sheila, and handed him her letter.

DEAR SHEILA KEMBLE,—Better run in town and see me to-morrow. I've got a great play for you from France. Rehearsals begin immediately. Trusting your rest has filled you with ambition for a strenuous season, I am,

Yours faithfully, HY. REBEN.

This threw Winfield into a panic. "But you promised me—"

"Yes, dear," she cooed, "and I've already written the answer. How's this?" She gave him the answer she

had worked over for an hour, trying to make it as business-like as possible:

Letter received regret state owing change plans shall not return stage this season best wishes.

SHEILA KEMBLE.

Even this did not allay Winfield's alarm. "Why do you say 'this season'?" he demanded. "Are you only marrying me for one season?"

"For all eternity," she cried, "but I wanted to let poor old Reben down easy."

Sheila found that Reben was not so easily let down as stirred up. An answer to the telegram arrived a few hours later, just in time to spoil the day:

You gave me word of honor as gentleman you would keep your contract better look it over again you will report for rehearsal Monday ten A.M. Odeon Theater.

REBEN.

Winfield stormed at Reben's language as much as at the situation:

"How dares he use such a tone to you? Are you his servant or are you my wife?"

"I'm neither, honey," Sheila said, very meekly. "I'm just the darned old public's little white slave."

"But you don't belong to the public. You belong to me."

"But I gave him my word first, honey," Sheila pleaded. "If it were just an ordinary contract, I could break it, but we shook hands on it and I gave him my word as a gentleman. If I broke that I couldn't be trusted to keep my word to you, could I, dear?"

It was a puzzling situation for Winfield. How could he demand that the woman in whose hands he was to put his honor should begin their compact by a breach of honor?

How could he counsel her to be false to one solemn obligation and expect her to be true to another assumed later?

Reben followed up his telegram by a letter of protest against Sheila's bad faith. He referred to the expense he had been at; he had bought a great foreign play, paying down heavy advance royalties; he had given large orders to scene-painters, lithographers, and printers, and had flooded the country with her photographs and his announcements. The cast was selected, and her defection would mean cruelty to them as well as disloyalty to him.

She felt helpless. Winfield was helpless. She could only mourn and he rage. They were like two lovers who find themselves on separate ships.

Winfield went back to his father's factory in a fume of wrath and grief. Sheila went to Reben's factory with the meekness of a mill-hand carrying a dinner-pail.

Sheila made a poor effort to smile at the stage-door keeper, who lifted his hat to her and welcomed her as if she were the goddess of spring. The theater had been lonely all summer, but with the autumn was burgeoning into vernal activity.

The company in its warm-weather clothes made little spots of color in the dimly lighted cave of the stage. The first of the members to greet Sheila was Floyd Eldon.

Eldon seized both of Sheila's hands and wrung them, and his heart cried aloud in his soft words: "God bless you, Sheila. We're to be together again and I'm to play your lover again. You've got to listen to me telling you eight times a week how much I—"

"Why, Mr. Batterson, how do you do?"

The director—Batterson again—came forward with other troupers, old friends or strangers. Then Reben called to Sheila from the night beyond the footlights. She stumbled and groped her way out front to him, and he scolded her roundly for giving him such a scare.

The director's voice calling the company together

rescued her from answering Reben's questions as to the mysterious "change of plans" that had inspired her telegram.

"I guess you must have been crazy with the heat," he said.

"Call it that," said Sheila. And she rejoined the company, trying not to be either uppish or 'umble in her new quality as the star.

The author of the play was a Parisian plutocrat whose wares had traversed all the oceans, though he had never ventured across the English Channel. So he was not present to read the play aloud. Ben Prior, the adapter, was a meek hack afraid of his own voice, and Batterson was not inclined to show the company how badly their director read. His assistant distributed the parts, and the company, clustered in chairs, read in turn as their cues came.

Each had hefted his own part, and judged it by the number of its pages. One might have guessed nearly how many pages each had by the vivacity or the dreariness of his attack.

"Eight sides!" growled old Jaffer as he counted his brochure.

It is a saddening thing to an ambitious actor to realize that his business for a whole season is to be confined to brief appearances and unimportant speeches.

People congratulated old Jaffer because he was out of the play after the first act. But, cynic as he was, he was not glad to feel that he would be in his street mufti when the second curtain rose. It is pleasant to play truant, but it is no fun to be turned out of school when everybody else is in.

Of all the people there the most listless was the one who had the biggest, bravest rôle, the one round which all the others revolved, the one to whom all the others "fed" the words that brought forth the witty or the thrilling lines.

Sheila had to be reminded of her cue again and again. Batterson's voice recalled her as from a distance.

It is as strange as anything so usual and immemorial can be, how madly lovers can love; how much agony they can extract from a brief separation; what bitter terror they can distil from ordinary events. As the tormented girl read her lines and later walked through the positions or stood about in the maddening stupidities of a first rehearsal, she had actually to battle with herself to keep from screaming aloud:

"I don't want to act! I don't want the public to love me! I want only my Bret!"

The temptation to hurl the part in Reben's face, to mock the petty withes of contract and promise, and to fly to her lover, insane as it was, was a temptation she barely managed to fight off.

CHAPTER XXX

IN a similar tempest of infinitely much ado about next to nothing the distant Bret Winfield was browbeating himself silently, pleading with himself not to disgrace himself by running away from his loathsome factory. His father needed his presence, and Sheila needed his absence.

But gusts of desire for the sight of her swept through him like manias. He would try to reach her on the long-distance telephone. At the theater, where there was as yet no one in the box-office, it was usually impossible to get an answer or to get a message delivered. The attendants would as soon have called a priest from mass as an actor from rehearsal. Sometimes, after hours of search with the long-distance probe, he would find Sheila at the hotel and they would pour out their longings across the distance till strange voices broke in and mocked their sentimentalities or begged them to get off the wire. It was strange to be eavesdropped by ghosts whose names or even whereabouts one could never know.

Winfield's mother observed her son's distress and insisted that he was ill. She demanded that he see a doctor; it might be some lingering fever or something infectious. It was both, but there is no inoculation, no antitoxin, yet discovered to prevent the attack on a normal being. The mumps, scarlet fever, malaria, typhoid and other ailments have their serums, but love has none. Light attacks of those affections procure immunity, but not of this.

Winfield finally told his mother what his malady was. "Mother, I'm in love—mad crazy about a girl."

Mrs. Winfield smiled. "You always are."

"It's real this time—"

"It always was."

"It means marriage."

This was not so amusing.

"Who is she?"

"Nobody you ever saw."

This was reassuring. Mrs. Winfield had never seen any girl in town quite good enough for her daughter-in-law.

Mrs. Winfield was very strict, and very religious in so far as religion is concerned with trying one's neighbors as well as oneself by very lofty and very inelastic laws of conduct.

Bret dreaded to tell his mother who Sheila was or what she was. He knew her opinion of the stage and its people. She had not expressed it often because she winced even at the mention of hopelessly improper subjects like French literature, the theater, classic art, playing cards, the works of Herbert Spencer, Ouida, Huxley, and people like that.

She knew so little of the theater that when she made him tell her the girl's name, "Sheila Kemble" meant nothing to her.

Mrs. Winfield demanded full information on the vital subject of her son's fiancée. Bret dodged her cross-examination in vain. He dilated on Sheila's beauty, her culture, her fascination, her devotion to him. But those were details; Mrs. Winfield wanted to know the important things:

"What church does she belong to?"

"I never thought to ask her."

"Are her people in good circumstances?"

"Very!"

"What is her father's business?"

"Er—he's a professional man."

"Oh! A lawyer?"

"No."

"Doctor?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Er—well—you see—he's very successful. He's famous in his line—makes a heap of money. He stands very high in his profession."

"That's good, but what is it?"

"Why—he— If you knew him—you'd be proud to have him for a father-in-law or—a—whatever relative he'd be to you."

"No doubt; but what *does* this wonderful man do for a living?"

"He's an actor."

Mrs. Winfield would have screamed the word in echo, but she was too weak. When she got her breath she hardly knew which of the myriad objections to mention first.

"An actor! You are engaged to the daughter of an actor! Why, that's nearly as bad as if she were an actress herself!"

Bret mumbled, "Sheila is an actress."

Then he ran for a glass of water.

At length his mother rallied sufficiently to flutter tenderly, with a mother's infinite capacity for forgiving her children—and nobody else:

"Oh, Bret! Bret! has my poor boy gone and fallen into the snare of some adventuress—some bad, bad woman?"

"Hush, mother; you mustn't speak so. Sheila is a good girl, the best in the world."

"I thought you said she was an actress."

This seemed to end the argument, but he amazed her by proceeding: "She is! and a fine one, the best actress in the country—in the world."

When Mrs. Winfield tried to prove from the profundity of her ignorance and her prejudice that an actress must be doomed he put his hand over his ears till she stopped. Then she began again:

"And are you going to follow this angel about, or is she going to reform?"

"She can't quit just now. She has a contract, but after this season she'll stop, and then we'll get married."

Mrs. Winfield caught at this eagerly. "You're not going to marry her at once then?"

"No. I wish I could, but she can't break her contract."

Mrs. Winfield smiled and settled back with relief. She felt as if an earthquake had passed by, leaving her alive and the house still on its foundations. She knew Bret and she was sure that any marriage scheduled for next year was as good as canceled already.

She wanted nothing more said about it. Her son's relations with an actress might be deplorable, but, fortunately, they were only transient and need not be discussed.

But Bret would not permit his love to be dismissed with scorn. He insisted that he adored Sheila and that she was adorable. He produced photographs of her, and the mother could not deny the girl's beauty. But she regarded it with an eye of such hostility that she found all the guiles and wiles that she wanted to find in it.

Bret insisted on his mother's meeting Sheila, which she refused to do. She announced that she would not meet her if she became his wife. She would not permit the creature to sully her home. She warned Bret not to mention it to his father, for the old man's heart was weak and he was discouraged enough over the conflict with the scales trust. The shock of a stage scandal might kill him.

The elder Winfield wandered into the dispute at its height. He insisted on knowing what it was. His wife tried to break it to him gently and nearly drove him mad with her delay. When she finally reached the horrible disclosure he did not swoon; he just laughed.

"Is that all! Mother, where's your common sense of humor? The young cub has been sowing some wild oats and he's trying to spare your feelings. Think nothing more about it. Bret is going to settle down to work, and

he won't have time for much more foolishness. And now let's drop it. Get your things packed and mine, for I've got to run over to New York for a board of directors' meeting with some big interests, and while I'm there I'll just go to a real doctor. These fossils here all prescribe the same pills."

Bret glared at his father almost contemptuously. He was heavily disappointed in his parents. They were unable to rise to a noble occasion.

An inspiration occurred to him. Their trip to New York came pat to his necessities. They had been cold to his description of Sheila. But once they met her, they could not but be swept off their feet—not if they had his blood in their veins.

He sent a voluminous telegram to Sheila asking her to call on his father and mother and make them hers. It was a manlike outrage on the etiquette of calls, but Sheila cared little for conventions of the stupid sort.

Bret could not persuade his mother to consent to meet Sheila and be polite until he implored her to treat Sheila at least with the humanity deserved by a Magdalen. That magic word disarmed Mrs. Winfield and gave her the courage of a missionary. She saw that it was plainly her duty to see the misguided creature. She might persuade her to change her ways. Of course she would incidentally persuade her of the impossibility of a marriage with Bret. She would appeal to the girl's better nature, for she imagined that even an actress was not totally depraved.

In an important conference with her husband Mrs. Winfield drew up a splendid campaign. She would try the effect of reason, and, if she failed, her husband would bring up the heavy artillery.

Mr. Charles Winfield determined to do his share by pointing out to the woman that Bret had no income and would have none. This would scare the creature away, for she was undoubtedly after the boy's money. What

else could she want? If worst came to worst, they might even buy her off. A few thousand dollars would be a cheap blackmail to pay for the release of their son.

The train that carried the elder Winfields to the ordeal of meeting with the threatening invader of their family was due in New York in the forenoon.

When Charles Winfield bought a paper to glance over it during his dining-car breakfast he was pleased to find a brief mention of the meeting of the directors. His own name was included in small type, with the initials wrong. Still, it was pleasant to be named in a New York paper.

As he turned the page he was startled to see a familiar face pop up before him as if with a cheerful "Good morning!" He studied it. It was familiar, but he could not place it. He read the name beneath—"Sheila Kemble"!

It was a large portrait and the text accompanying it was an adroit piece of press-agency. Reben's publicity man, Starr Coleman, had smuggled past the dramatic editor's jealous guard a convincing piece of fiction purporting to describe Sheila's opinions on woman suffrage as it would affect the home. He had been unable to get at Sheila during rehearsals and he had concocted the interview out of his own head.

Winfield passed the paper across to his wife. Both were decidedly shaken. Winfield's logical mind automatically worked out a problem in ratio. If he himself felt important because a New York newspaper included his name in a list of arrivals, how important was Sheila, who received half a column of quotation and a photograph?

Furthermore, Sheila's name was coupled with that of a prominent woman whose social distinction was nation-wide.

Mrs. Winfield fetched forth her spectacles, read Sheila's dictum carefully and with some awe. There were two or three words in it that Mrs. Winfield could not understand —neither could Sheila when she read it. Starr Coleman

liked big words. But in any case the interview scared Mrs. Winfield out of her scheme to play the missionary. By the same token Mr. Winfield decided not to offer Sheila a bribe.

Their plans were in complete disarray when they reached New York.

They had not been settled long in their hotel when the telephone-bell rang.

Mrs. Winfield answered the call, since her husband was belatedly shaving himself.

The telephone operator said, "M' Skemble to speak to M' Swinfield."

Mrs. Winfield's heart began to skip. She answered, feebly, "This is Mrs. Winfield."

The operator snapped, "Go ahead," and another voice appeared, putting extraordinary music into a lyrical "Hello!"

Mrs. Winfield answered: "Hello! This is Mrs. Winfield."

"Oh, how do you do? This is Mrs. Kemble, Sheila's mother. Your son asked her to call you up as soon as you got in, but she is rehearsing and asked me to."

"That's very n-nice of you."

"Why, thank you. Your son probably explained to you that Sheila is a horribly busy young woman. I know you are busy, too. You'll be doing a lot of shopping, I presume. I should like to call on you as one helpless parent on another, but my husband and I are leaving in a day or two for one of our awful tours to the Coast. The ocean is so beautiful that I wondered if you wouldn't be willing to run out here and take dinner with us to-night."

Mrs. Winfield's wits were so scattered that she had not the strength even to improvise another engagement. She was not an agile liar. She murmured, feebly: "It would be very nice. Thank you."

Then the irresistible Polly Farren voice purred on: "That's splendid! We'll send our car for you. It's not

a long run out here, and the car can bring Sheila out at the same time. You can have a little visit together."

"That would be very nice. Thank you," Mrs. Winfield babbled.

"One more thing, if I may," Polly chanted. "Our town car is in New York. It took Sheila in, you know. The driver has nothing at all to do till five. My husband says he would be ever so pleased if you'd let me put it at your disposal. Please call it your very own while you're in the city, won't you? The chauffeur is quite reliable, really."

Poor Mrs. Winfield could only wail, "Hold the wire a moment, please."

She was unutterably miserable. She dropped the receiver and called her lather-jawed husband in conference. They whispered like two counterfeiters with the police at the door. They could see no way of escape without brutality.

Mrs. Winfield took up the receiver and wailed, "My husband says it is very nice of you and of course we accept."

"Oh, that's splendid!" throbbed in her ear. "I'll telephone the man to call for you at once. Good-by till dinner, then. Good-by."

Mr. Winfield glared at his wife, and she looked away, sighing:

"She has a right nice voice, anyway."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE car was a handsomer car than their own, and in the quietest taste. Polly had somewhat softened the truth in the matter of its tender. Roger had protested mightily against offering the car to the Winfields, but Sheila and Polly had taken it away from him.

He had resisted their scheme for the dinner with even greater vigor, but Polly mocked him and gave her orders. Seeing himself committed to the plot, he said, "Well, if we've got to have this try-out performance we'll make a production of it with complete change of costumes, calciums, and extra people."

Polly and Roger did not approve of Bret any more than the Winfields approved of Sheila; but they resolved to jolt the Philistines while they were at it.

After a day in the Kemble limousine the Winfields picked up Sheila, who had been spending an hour on her toilet, though she apologized for the wreckage of rehearsals.

She dazzled both of them with her beauty. She did most of the talking, but permitted restful silences for meditation. The Winfields were as shy and as staring as children. It was the first time they had been so close to an actress.

The Kemble cottage on Long Island was a pleasant enough structure at any time, but at night under a flattering moon it looked twice its importance.

The dinner was elaborate and the guests impressive. Roger apologized for the presence of a famous millionaire, Tilton, his wife, and their visitor Lady Braithwaite. He

said that they had been invited before, though it would have been more accurate to say that they had been implored at the last moment, and had consented because Roger said he needed them.

Sheila never acted harder. She never suffered worse from stage-fright and never concealed it more completely. She suffered both as author and as actor. Her little comedy was, like Hamlet's brief tragedy, produced for an ulterior purpose. Which it accomplished.

The Kembles had succeeded in shifting the burden of discomfort to their observers. The Winfields felt hopelessly small town. Polly and Sheila were exquisitely gracious, and Lady Braithwaite kept my-dearing Polly, while the millionaire called Kemble by his first name. Roger set old Winfield roaring over his stories and, as if quite casually, he let fall occasional allusions to the prosperity of prosperous stage people. He referred to the fact that a certain actress, "poor Nina Fielding," had "had a bad season, and cleared only sixty thousand dollars."

Tilton exclaimed, "Impossible! that's equivalent to six per cent. on a million dollars."

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "Well, there are others that make more, and if Nina is worth a million, Sheila is worth two of her. And she'll prove it, too. And why shouldn't actors get rich? They do the world as much good as your manufacturers of shoes and electricity and automobiles. Why shouldn't they make as much money?"

Tilton said: "Well, perhaps they should, but they haven't done so till recently. It's a big change from the time when you actors were rated as beggars and vagabonds; you'll admit that much, won't you?"

He had touched Kemble on a sensitive spot, a subject that he had fumed over and studied. Roger was always ready to deliver a lecture on the topic. He blustered now:

"That old idiocy! Do you believe it, too? Don't you know that the law that branded actors as vagrants re-

ferred only to actors without a license and not enrolled in an authorized company? At that very time the chief noblemen had their own troupes and the actors were entertained royally in castles and palaces.

"For a time the monks and nuns used to give plays, and there was a female playwright who was a nun in the tenth century. The Church sometimes fought against the theater during the dark ages, but so it fought against sculpture and painting the human form. Actors were forbidden Christian burial once and were treated as outlaws, but so were the Catholics in Protestant countries and Protestants in Catholic regions, and Presbyterians and Episcopalians in each other's realms, and Quakers in Boston.

"The Puritans did not believe in the theater any more than the theater believed in the Puritans, and there was a period in England when plays had to be given secretly in private houses. But what does that prove? Religious services had to be given the same way; and political meetings.

"There are plenty of people who hate the theater to-day. It always will have enemies—like the other sciences and arts.

"But one thing is sure. Wherever actors have been permitted at all, they have always gone with the best people. Several English actors have been knighted recently, but that's nothing new. The actor Roscius was knighted at Rome in 50 B.C. In Greece they carved the successful actors' names in stone.

"We made big money then, too. The actor Æsopus—Cicero's friend—left his good-for-nothing son so much money that the cub dissolved a pearl in vinegar and drank it. He tossed off what would amount, in our money, to a forty-thousand-dollar cocktail.

"In the Roman Empire actors like Paris stood so high at court that Juvenal said, 'If you want to get the royal favor ask an actor, not a lord.' When Josephus went to

Rome to plead for the lives of some priests, a Jewish actor named Aliturus introduced him to Nero and his empress and got him his petition. It seems funny to think of a Jewish actor at the court of Nero. The Roman emperor Justinian married an actress and put her on the throne beside him.

"In Italy after the Renaissance one of the actresses—I forget her name—was so much honored that when she came to a town she was received with a salute of cannon.

"Louis XIV. loved Molière, stood godfather to his child, and suggested a scene for one of his plays. One of Napoleon's few intimate friends was the actor Talma.

"David Garrick was in high favor at court and he sold his interest in Drury Lane, when he retired, for one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

"And if I may speak of my own ancestors, Mrs. Siddons was one of the most highly esteemed and irreproachable women of her time. Sir Joshua Reynolds was proud to paint her as the Tragic Muse and old Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote his autograph on the canvas along the edge of her robe because he said he wanted his name to go down to posterity on the hem of her garment.

"Her brother, John Philip Kemble, was so successful that he bought a sixth share in Covent Garden for over one hundred thousand dollars. When it burned down it would have ruined him if the Duke of Northumberland had not made him a loan of fifty thousand dollars. And later he refused repayment.

"Take an actress of our own time, Sarah Bernhardt. What woman in human history has had more honor, or made more money? Or take—"

Polly felt it time to intervene. "For Heaven's sake, ring down! You're not at Chautauqua, you know."

Kemble started and blinked like a sleep-walker abruptly wakened. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I was riding my hobby and he ran away."

The Winfields were plentifully impressed and Mrs. Winfield completely overwhelmed when Lady Braithwaite said:

"He's quite right, my dear. There's no question of the social position of the stage. So many actresses have married into our peerage that you can't tell which is the annex of which; and no end of young peers are going on the stage. They can't act, but it keeps them out of mischief in a way. And I can't see that stage-marriages are any less permanent than the others. Can you? I mean to say, I've known most charming cases. My poor friend the Duchess of Stonehenge had a son who was a hopeless little cad and rotter—and he married an actress—you know the one I mean—from the Halls she was, too. And you know she's made a man of him—a family man, too, she has, really! And she's the most devoted of mothers. Really she is!"

Somehow the character Lady Braithwaite gave the stage made more impression on Mrs. Winfield than all of Roger's history.

On the long, late ride back to their hotel the old couple were meek, quite whipped-out. They had come to redeem an actress from perdition or bribe her not to drag their son to her own level; they returned with their ears full of stage glories and a bewildered feeling that an alliance with the Kemble family would be the making of them.

As the train bore them homeward, however, their old prejudices resumed sway. They began to feel resentful. If Sheila had been more lowly, suppliant, and helpless they might have stooped to her. But a daughter-in-law who could earn over fifty thousand dollars a year was a dangerous thing about the house. Sheila's scenario had worked just a little too well.

Young Winfield met his parents at the train and searched their faces eagerly. They looked guilty and almost pouting. They said nothing till they were in their own car — it looked shabby after the Kemble turnout. Then Bret pleaded:

"Well, what do you think of Sheila?"

"She's very nice," said his mother, stingily.

"Is that all? She wrote me that you were wonderful. She said my father was one of the most distinguished-looking men she ever saw, and as for my mother, she was simply beautiful, so fashionable and aristocratic—an angel, she called you, mother."

One may see through these things, but they can't be resisted. As Roger Kemble used to put it: "Say what you will, a bouquet beats a brickbat for comfort no matter what direction it comes from."

The Winfields blushed with pride and warmed over their comments on Sheila. In fact, they went so far as to say that she would never give up the fame and fortune and admiration that were waiting for her, just to marry a common manufacturer's son.

This threw the fear of love into Bret and made him more than ever frantic to see Sheila and be reassured or put out of his misery. There was no restraining him. His father protested that he was needed at home. But it was mating-season with the young man, and parents were only in his way, as their parents had been in theirs.

CHAPTER XXXII

BRET telegraphed Sheila that he was coming to New York to see her. She telegraphed back:

Awfully love see you but hideously busy rehearsals souls devotion.

These poor telegraph operators! The honey they have to transmit must fairly stick to the wires and gum up the keys.

Winfield determined to go, anyway—and to surprise her. He set out without warning and flew to the theater as soon as he reached New York. The tip-loving doorman declined so fiercely to take his card in that he frightened the poor swain out of the proffer of a bribe.

While Winfield loitered irresolutely near the stage entrance an actor strolled out to snatch a few puffs of a cigarette while he was not needed. Winfield was about to ask him to tell Miss Kemble that Mr. Winfield was waiting for her. He saw that the actor was Eldon.

He dodged behind the screen of a fire-escape from the gallery and slunk away unobserved. There was no fire-escape in his soul from the conflagration of jealousy that shot up at the sight of his rival, and the thought that Eldon was spending his days in Sheila's company, while her affianced lover gnashed his teeth outside.

He hung about like Mary's lamb for meekness and like Red Riding-Hood's wolf for wrath. He would wait for Sheila to come out for lunch. Hours passed. He saw Eldon dash across the street to a little restaurant and

return with a cup of coffee and a bundle of sandwiches. Ye gods, he was feeding her!

With all a lover's fiendish ingenuity in devising tortures for himself, Winfield transported his soul from the vat of boiling oil to the rack and the cell of Little Ease and back again. He imagined the most ridiculous scenes in the theater and suspected Sheila of such treacheries that if he had really believed them he would surely have been cured of his love.

He saw that a policeman was regarding him with suspicion, and since he was faint with torture on an empty stomach, he went to a restaurant to kill time. When he returned he waited an hour before he ventured to steal upon the stage-door keeper again. Then he learned that the rehearsal had been dismissed two hours before. Aching with rage, he taxicabbed to Sheila's hotel. She had not returned. Out riding with Eldon somewhere no doubt!

He went to the railroad station. He would escape from the hateful town where there was nothing but perfidy and vice. He called up the hotel to bid Sheila a bitter farewell. Pennock answered and informed him that Sheila had been at the dressmaker's all afternoon and was just returned, so dead that Pennock had made her take a nap. She shouldn't be disturbed till she woke, no, not for a dozen Winfields, especially as she had an evening rehearsal.

Winfield returned to her hotel and hung about like a process-server. He waited in the lobby, reading the evening papers, one after another, from "ears" to tail. He telephoned up to Pennock till she forbade the operator to ring the bell again.

The big fellow was almost hysterical when a hall-boy called him to the telephone-booth. He heard Sheila's voice. She was fairly squealing with delight at his presence. Instantly chaos became a fresh young world, all Eden.

Sheila had just learned of Winfield's arrival. She promised to be down as soon as she had scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She invited him to take her to dinner at Claremont before she went back to "the morgue," as she called the theater—and meant it, for she was fagged out. Everything was wrong with the play, the cast, and, worst of all, with her costumes.

There was further tantalism for Bret in the greeting in the hotel lobby. A formal hand-clasp and a more ardent eye-clasp were all they dared venture. The long bright summer evening made it impossible to steal kisses in the taxicab, except a few snapshots caught as they ran under the elevated road. But they held hands and wrung fingers and talked rapturous nonsense.

The view of the Hudson was supremely beautiful from the restaurant piazza, until Reben arrived with his old Diana Rhys and the two of them filled the landscape like another Storm King and Dunderberg.

Mrs. Rhys had for some time resented Reben's interest in Sheila and had made life infernal for him. She began on him at the table. He was furious with humiliation and swarthier with jealousy of the unknown occupant of the chair opposite Sheila.

Sheila explained to Winfield in hasty asides that she was in hot water. Reben did not like to have her appear in public places at all, and then only with the strictest chaperonage.

Winfield sniffed at such Puritanism from him.

"It isn't that, honey," Sheila said, "it's business. He says that actresses, of all people, should lead secluded lives because—who wants to pay two dollars to see a woman who can be seen all over town for nothing? He's planning a regular convent life for me, and he's shutting down on all the personal publicity. I'm glad of it—for I really belong to you.

"Reben wants me to be especially strict because I've got to play innocent young girls, and he says that many

a promising actress has killed herself commercially with the nice people, by thinking that it was none of the public's business what she did outside the theater. Of course it isn't really their business in a way, but the public make it so.

"And you can't wonder at it. I know I'm not prudish or narrow, but when I see a play where a character is supposed to be terribly ignorant and pathetic and trusting, it sort of hurts the illusion when I know that the actress is really a hateful cat who has broken up a dozen homes.

"So you see Reben's right. He'd come over here now and send me home if old Rhys would let him. He's dying to know who you are. But of course I won't tell him."

This did not comfort Winfield in the least. It angered him, too, to think of Reben as right about anything; and he felt no thanks to him for his counsels of prudence. When it is insisted too strenuously that honesty is good policy, even honesty becomes suspect.

The tête-à-tête and the dinner were ruined and it was not yet dark enough on the way back to permit any of the embraces and kisses that Winfield was famished for. He took no pleasure even in the spectacular sunset along the Hudson—miles of assorted crimsons in the sky, with the cool green Palisades as a barrier between the radiant heavens and the long panel of the mirror-river that told the sky how beautiful it was.

Winfield was completely dissatisfied with life. It was peculiarly distressing to be so deeply in love with so dear a girl so deeply in love in turn, and to have her profession and its necessities brandished like a flaming sword between them.

This experience is likely to play an increasing part in the romances of the future as more and more women claim a larger and larger share of life outside the home. Existence has always been a process of readjustments, but certainly at no time in history has there been such a revolution as this in the relations of man and woman.

From now on numbers of husbands will learn what wives have endured for ages in waiting for the spouse to come home from the shop.

The usual pattern of emotion was almost ludicrously reversed when Winfield took his sweetheart to her factory and left her at the door to resume her overtime night-work, while he idled about in the odious leisure of a housekeeper.

Winfield hated the situation with all the ferocity of a lover denied, and all the indignation of an old-fashioned youth who believed in taking the woman of his choice under his wing to protect her from the world.

But he had chosen a girl who proposed to conquer the world and who would find the shadow under his wing too close. He felt himself as feeble and misallied as a ring-dove mated with a falcon. She was an artist, a public idol, while he at best was as obscure as a vice-president; he was only the indolent heir of a self-made man.

He dawdled about, revolting against his dependency, till Sheila finished her rehearsal. Then she met him and they rode through the moonlit Park. She loved him immensely, but she was so exhausted that she fell asleep in his arm. He kissed the wan little moon of her face as it lay back on his shoulder. He loved her with all his might. He loved her enough to take her home to her hotel and surrender her to herself while he moped away to his own hotel.

The next day it was the same story except that she promised to ask for a respite at the luncheon hour and meet him at a restaurant near the theater. The appointment was for one o'clock. He waited until two-thirty before she appeared. And then she had only time to tell him that Reben had given her a merciless scolding for her escapade of the evening before.

Winfield expressed his desire to punch Reben's head, and Sheila rejoiced at having a champion, even though (or perhaps because) the champion claimed her more exclusively than Reben did.

Bret had to endure another dismal wait until dinner, and then there was again an evening rehearsal. The time of production was approaching and Batterson was growing demoniac. After the rehearsal Bret from across the street watched all the other members of the company leave the theater. Even Eldon came forth, but not Sheila.

Another hour Bret spent of watchful waiting, and then she appeared with Reben and Prior. They had been having a consultation and a quarrel, and they continued it to the hotel, Sheila not daring to shake them off. Winfield shadowed them along the street, and waited outside till they left the hotel; then he made haste to find Sheila.

She was distraught between the demands of her play and her lover. Revisions had been made and she had a new scene to learn and a new interpretation of the character to achieve before morning. The only crumb of good news was the fact that Reben was to be out of town the next day and she could sneak Winfield in to watch a rehearsal, if he wanted to come.

He wanted to exceedingly. It was one way of borrowing trouble.

He stole in at the front of the house and sat in the empty dark, unobserved, but not unobserving. He had the wretched privilege of watching Eldon make love to Sheila and take her in his arms. A dozen embraces were tried before Batterson could find just the attitude to suit him. And that did not suit Sheila.

Partly because it is almost impossible for a man to show a woman how she would act, and partly because Sheila could almost see Bret's gaze blazing from the dark like a wolf's eyes, she was incapable of achieving the effect Batterson wanted.

The stage-manager was reaching his ugly phase, and after leaving Sheila in Eldon's clasp for ten minutes while he tried her arms in various poses, all of them awkward, he walked to the table where Prior sat and muttered:

"Her mother would have grasped it in a minute. Isn't it funny that the children of great actors are always damned fools?"

The whole company overheard and Winfield rose to his feet in a fury. But he heard Sheila say to Eldon, for Batterson's benefit:

"Why, I didn't know that Mr. Batterson's parents were great actors, did you?"

Batterson caught this as Sheila intended, and he flew into one of the passions that were to be expected about this time. He slammed the manuscript on the table and made the usual bluff of walking out. Sheila did not follow. She sank into a chair and made signals to the invisible Bret not to interfere, as she knew he was about to do.

He understood her meaning and restrained his impulse to climb over the footlights once more.

Batterson fought it out with himself, then came back, and with a sigh of heavenly resignation resumed the rehearsal. The company was refreshed by the divertisement and Sheila and Batterson were as amiable as two warriors after a truce. The embrace was speedily agreed upon.

Sheila met Bret at luncheon, and now she had him on her hands. He was ursine with clumsy wrath.

"To think that my wife-to-be must stand up there and let a mucker like that stage-manager swear at her! Good Lord! I'll break his head!"

Sheila wondered how long she would be able to endure these alternating currents, but she put off despair and cooed:

"Now, honey, you can't go around breaking all the heads in town. You mustn't think anything of it. Poor old Batty is excited, and so are we all. It's just a business dispute. It's always this way when the production is near."

"And are you going to let that fellow Eldon fondle you like that?"

"Why, honey dear, it's in the manuscript!"

"Then you can cut it out. I won't have it, I tell you! What kind of a dog do you think I am that I'm to let other men hug my wife?"

"But it's only in public, dearest, that he hugs me."

At the recurrence of this extraordinary logic Winfield simply opened his mouth like a fish on land. He was suffocating with too much air.

Sheila and he kept silence a moment. They were remembering the somewhat similar dispute in another moonlit scene, at Clinton. Only then he was an audacious flirter; now he was a conservative fiancé. Her logic was the same, but he had veered to the opposite side. She murmured, dolefully:

"You don't understand the stage very well, do you, dear?"

"No, I don't!" he growled. "And I don't want to. It's no place for a woman. You've got to give it up."

"I've promised to, honey, as soon as I can."

"Well, in the mean while, you've got to cut out that hugging business with Eldon—or anybody else. I won't have it, that's all!"

To her intense amazement Sheila was flattered by this overweening tyranny. She rejoiced at her lover's wealth of jealousy, the one supreme proof of true love in a woman's mind, a proof that is weightier than any tribute of praise or jewelry or toil or sacrifice.

She said she would see if the embrace could be omitted. The next day Reben sat in the orchestra and she went down to sit at his side. She did not mention Winfield's part in the matter, of course, but craftily insinuated:

"Do you know something? I've been thinking that maybe it's a mistake to have that embrace in the second act. It seems to me to—er—to anticipate the climax."

Reben, all unsuspecting, leaped into the snare:

"That's so! I always say that once the hero and hero-

ine clinch, the play's over. We'll just cut it there, and save it to the end of the last act."

Sheila, flushed with her victory, pressed further:

"And that's another point.. Wouldn't it be more—er—artistic if you didn't show the embrace even then—just have the lovers start toward each other and ring down so that the curtain drops before they embrace? It would be novel, and it would leave something to the audience's imagination."

Reben was skeptical of this: "We might try it in one of the tank towns, but I'm afraid the people will be sore if they don't see the lovers brought together for at least one good clutch. Nothing like trying things out, though."

Sheila was tempted to ask him not to tell Batterson that it was her idea. The fear was unnecessary. Any advice that Reben accepted became at once his own idea. He advanced to the orchestra rail and told Batterson to "cut out both clutches."

Batterson consented with ill grace and Eldon looked so crestfallen, so humiliated, that Sheila hastened to reassure him that it was nothing personal. But he was not convinced.

He was enduring bitter days. His love for Sheila would not expire. She treated him with the greatest formality. She paid him the deference belonging to a leading man. She was more gracious and more zealous for his success than most stars are. But he read in her eyes no glimmer of the old look.

He hoped that this was simply because she was too anxious and too busy to consider him, and that once the play was prosperously launched she would have time to love him.

This comfort sustained him through the loss of the two embraces. He could not have imagined that Sheila had cut them out to please Winfield, of whose presence in her environs he never dreamed.

At dinner that evening Sheila told Bret how she had

brought about the excision of the two embraces. He was as proud as Lucifer and she rejoiced in having contrived his happiness. This was her chief ambition now. She was thinking more of him and his peace than of her own success or of that disturbance of the public peace which makes actors, story-tellers, acrobats, and singers and other entertainers interesting.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SHEILA was passing through the meanest phase of play production when the first enthusiasms are gone and the nagging mechanics of position, intonation, and speed are wearing away the nerves: when those wrenches and inconsistencies of plot and character that are inevitably present in so artificial a structure as a play begin to stick out like broken bones; when scenery and property and costumes are turning up late and wrong; and when the first audience begins to loom nearer and nearer as a tidal wave toward which a ship is hurried all unready and aquiver to its safety or to disaster.

At such a time Sheila found the presence of Winfield a cool shelter in Sahara sands. He was an outsider; he was real; he loved her; he didn't want her to be an actress; he didn't want her to work; he wanted her to rest in his arms. His very angers and misunderstandings all sprang from his love of herself.

Yet only a few days and she must leave him. The most hateful part of the play was still to come—the process of "trying it on the dog"—on a series of "dog-towns," where the play would be produced before small and timid audiences afraid to commit themselves either to amusement or emotion before the piece had a metropolitan verdict passed upon it.

It was a commonplace that the test was uncertain, yet what other test was possible? There was too much danger in throwing the piece on "cold" before the New York death-watch of the first night. That would be to hazard a great investment on the toss of a coin.

Sheila was cowering before the terrors that faced her. The difficulties came rushing at her one after another. She was only a young girl, after all, and she had swum out too far. Winfield was her sole rescuer from the world. The others kept driving her farther and farther out to sea. He would bring her to land.

The thought of separating from him for a whole theatrical season grew intolerable. Fatigue and discouragement preyed on her reserve of strength. Fear of the public swept her with flashes of cold sweat. She could not sleep; herds of nightmares stampeded across her lonely bed. She saw herself stricken with forgetfulness, with aphasia; she saw the audiences hooting at her; she read the most venomous criticism; she saw herself in train wrecks and theater fires. She saw the toppling scenery crushing her, or weight-bags dropping on her from the flies.

The production was heavy and complicated and Reben believed in many scenery rehearsals. There were endless periods of waiting for stage carpenters to repair mistakes, for property-men to provide important articles omitted from the property plot. The big set came in with the stairway on the wrong side. Almost the whole business of the act had to be reversed and learned over again. The last-act scene arrived in a color that made Sheila's prettiest costume hideous. She must have a new gown or the scene must be repainted. A new gown was decided on; this detail meant hours more of fittings at the dressmaker's.

The final rehearsals were merciless. Sheila left Bret at the stage door at ten o'clock one morning and did not put her head out of the theater till three o'clock the next morning. And five hours later she must stand for costume photographs in a broiling gallery.

Reben, utterly discouraged by the look of the play in its setting, feared to bring it into New York even after the two weeks of trial performances he had scheduled. An opportunity to get into Chicago turned up, and he

canceled his other bookings. Sheila was liked in Chicago and he determined to make for there. The first performance was shifted from Red Bank, New Jersey, to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Sheila was in dismay and Bret grew unmanageable. The only excuse for the excitement of both was the fact that lovers have always been the same. Romeo and Juliet would not wait for Romeo to come back from banishment. They had to be married secretly at once. The world has always had its Gretna Greens for frantic couples.

So this frantic couple—not content with all its other torments—must inflict mutual torment. Bret loved Sheila so bitterly that he could not endure the ordeal she was undergoing. The wearier and more harried she grew, the more he wearied and harrowed her with his doubts, his demands, his fears of losing her. He was so jealous of her ambition that he made a crime of it.

He looked at her with farewell in his eyes and shook his head as over her grave and groaned: "I'm going to lose you, Sheila. You're not for me."

This frightened her. She was even less willing to lose him than he her. When she demanded why he should say such things he explained that if she left him now he would never catch up with her again. Her career was too much for him, and her loss was more than he could bear.

She mothered him with eyes of such devoted pity that he said: "Don't stare at me like that. You look a hundred and fifty years old."

She felt so. She was his nurse and his medicine, and she was at that epoch of her soul when her function was to make a gift of herself.

When he sighed, "I wanted you to be my wife" it was the "my" that thrilled her by its very selfishness; it was the past tense of the verb that alarmed her.

"You wanted me to be!" she gasped. "Don't you want me any more?"

"God knows there's nothing else I want in the world. But I can't have you. My mother said that I couldn't get you; she said that your ambition and the big money ahead of you would keep you from giving yourself to me."

The primeval feud between a man's mother and his wife surged up in her. She said, less in irony than she realized: "Oh, she said that, did she? Well, then, I'll marry you just for spite."

"If you only would, then I'd feel sure of you. I'd have no more fears."

"All right. I'll marry you."

"When?"

"Whenever you say."

"Now?"

"This minute."

It was more like a bet than a proposal. He seized it. "I'll take you."

They had snapped their wager at each other almost with hostility. They glared defiantly together; then their eyes softened. Laughter gurgled in their throats. His hands shot across the table; she put hers in them, in spite of the waiters.

A fierce impulse to make certain of possession caught them to their feet. He paid his bill standing up, and would not wait for change. They found a jewelry-shop and bought the ring. They took the subway to City Hall; a taxicab would be too slow.

There was no difficulty about the license. Every facility is offered to those who take the first plunge into marriage. The ascent into Paradise is as easy as the descent into Avernus. It is the getting back to earth that is hard in both cases.

"Shall we be married here in the City Hall?" said the licentiate. "It's quicker."

"I—I had rather hoped to be married in church," Sheila pouted. "But whatever you say—"

"It will make you late to rehearsal," he said. He was very indulgent to her career now that he was sure of her.

"Who cares?" she murmured. "Let's go to the Little Church Around the Corner."

And so they did, and waited their turn at the busy altar.

Then there was a furious scurry back to the theater. Mrs. Winfield kissed her husband good-by and dashed into the stage door to take her scolding. But Mr. Winfield was laughing as he rode away to arrange for their lodging for the remaining two days. Also his wife had made him promise to break the news to Pennock. Her father and mother were traveling now in the mid-West.

If Bret had known Pennock he might not have promised so glibly.

When Pennock finished with Winfield there was nothing further to say in his offense. She told him he was a monstrous brute and Sheila was a little fool to trust him. She declared that he had blighted the happiness of the best girl in the world, and ruined her career just as it was beginning. Then Pennock locked him out and went to packing Sheila's things. She wept all over the child's clothes as if Sheila were buried already. Then she took to her bed and cried her pillow soppy.

Sheila, all braced for a tirade from Batterson for her truancy, found that she had not been missed. The carpenters had the scenery spread on the floor of the stage like sails blown over, and the theater was a boiler-factory of noise. Shortly after her appearance Batterson called the company into the lobby for rehearsal. He took up the act at the place where they had stopped in the forenoon—a point at which Eldon caught Sheila's hands in his and lifted them to his lips.

Now, as Eldon took those two beloved palms in his and bent his gaze on her fingers it fell on Sheila's shining new wedding-ring. The circlet caught his eye; he studied it with vague surprise.

"A new ring?" he whispered, casually, not realizing its significance.

Sheila blushed so ruddily and snatched her hand away with such guilt that he understood. He groaned, "My God, no!"

"I beg you!" she whispered.

"What's that?" said Batterson, who had been speaking to Prior.

"I lost the line," said Eldon, looking as if he had lost his life. Batterson flung it to him angrily.

There was nothing for Sheila to do but throw herself on Eldon's mercy at the first moment when she could steal a word with him alone.

He did not say, "You had no mercy on me."

She knew it. It was more eloquent unsaid. He was a gallant gentleman, and sealed away his hopes of Sheila in a tomb.

At dinner Sheila told Bret about the incident, and he was secure enough in the stronghold of her possession to recognize the chivalry of his ex-rival.

"Mighty white of him," he said. "Didn't anybody else notice it?"

"I put my gloves on right afterward," said Sheila, "but I—I don't dare wear it again."

"Don't dare wear your wedding-ring!" Winfield roared. "Say, what kind of a marriage is this, anyway?"

"I hope it's not dependent on a piece of metal round my finger," Sheila protested. "Your real wedding-ring is round my heart."

This was not enough for Winfield. She explained to him patiently (and gladly because of the importance he gave the emblem) that she played an unmarried girl in the comedy. And the audience would be sure to spot the wedding-ring.

It simply had to come off, and she begged him to understand and be an angel and take it off himself.

He drew it away at last. But he did not like the omen.

She put it on a ribbon and he knotted it about her neck. Then she remembered that she wore a dinner gown in the play, and it had to come off the ribbon. She would have to carry it in her pocketbook.

The omens were hopelessly awry.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE brand-new couple forgot problems of this and every other sort in the raptures and supernal contentments of belonging to each other utterly and forever.

The notifying of their parents was one of the unpleasantest of tasks. They put it off till the next day. Sheila's father and mother had already begun their tour to the Coast and the news found them in the Middle West.

Sheila telegraphed to them:

Hope my good news wont seem bad news to you Bret and I were quietly married yesterday please keep it secret both terribly terribly happy play opens Grand Rapids Monday best love from us both to you both.

Her good news was sad enough for them. It filled them with forebodings. That phrase "terribly happy" seemed uncannily appropriate. Between the acts of their comedy that night they clung to each other and wept, moaning: "Poor child! The poor child!"

Winfield's situation was summed up in a telegram to his home.

Happiest man on earth married only woman on earth yesterday please send your blessings and forgiveness and five hundred dollars.

Bret's mother fainted with a little wail and his father's weak heart indulged in wild syncopations. When Mrs. Winfield was resuscitated she lay on a couch, weeping tiny old tears and whimpering:

"The poor boy! The poor boy!"

The father sat bronzed with sick anger. He had built up a big industry and the son he had reared to carry it after him had turned out a loafer, a chaser of actresses, and now the worthless dependent on one of them.

Charles Winfield pondered like an old Brutus if it were not his solemn duty to punish the renegade with disinheritance; to divert his fortune to nobler channels and turn over his industry to a nephew who was industrious and loyal to the factory.

But he sent the five hundred dollars. In his day he had eloped with his own wife and alienated his own parents and hers. But that had been different. Now his mouth was full of the ashes of his hopes.

Reben was yet to be told. Sheila said that he had troubles enough on his mind and was in such a state of temper, anyway, that it would be kinder to him not to tell him. This was not altogether altruism.

She dreaded the storm he would raise and longed for a portable cyclone-cellar. She knew that he would denounce her for outrageous dishonor in her treatment of him, and from his point of view there was no justifying her unfealty. But she felt altogether assured that she had accomplished a higher duty. In marrying her true love she was fulfilling her contract with God and Nature and Life, far greater managers than any Reben.

She had, therefore, for her final rapture the exquisite tang of stolen sweets. And to the mad completeness of the escapade was added the hallowing sanction of law and the Church.

It was a honeymoon, indeed, but pitilessly interrupted by the tasks of departure, and pitifully brief.

The question of whether or not her husband—how she did read that word "husband"!—should travel on the same train with her to Grand Rapids was a hard riddle.

Both of them were unready to publish the delirious secret of their wedding.

There was to be a special sleeping-car for the company. For Sheila as the star the drawing-room was reserved, while Reben had claimed the stateroom at the other end of the coach.

To smuggle Bret into her niche would be too perilous. For her to travel in another car with him was equally impossible. If he went on the same train he might be recognized in the dining-car. For her to take another train would not be permitted. A manager has to keep his flock together.

At length they were driven to the appalling hardship of separation for the journey. Bret would take an earlier train, and arrange for their sojourn at the quietest hotel in Grand Rapids. She would join him there, and no one would know of her tryst.

So they agreed, and she saw him off on the noon express. Of all the topsy-turvy households ever heard of, this was the worst! But they parted as fiercely as if he were going to the wars.

The company car left at five o'clock in the afternoon, and was due in Grand Rapids at one the next day. Eldon and Pennock alone knew that the young star was a young bride. Both of them regarded Sheila with such woeful reproach that she ordered Pennock to change her face or jump off the train, and she shut herself away from Eldon in her drawing-room.

But she was soon routed out by Batterson for a reading rehearsal of a new scene that Prior had concocted. She was so afraid of Eldon's eyes and so absent-minded with thoughts of her courier husband that Batterson thought she had lost her wits.

Twice she called Eldon "Bret" instead of "Ned," the name of his rôle. That was how he learned who it was she had married.

Even when she escaped to study the new lines she could not get her mind on anything but fears for the train that carried her husband.

After dinner Reben called on her for a chat. He alluded to the fact that he had wired ahead for the best room in the best hotel for the new star.

Sheila was aghast at this complication, which she would have foreseen if she had ever been either a star or a bride before.

Reben was in a mood of hope. The voyage to new scenes heartened everybody except Sheila. Reben kept trying to cheer her up. He could best have cheered her by leaving her. He imputed her distracted manner to stage-fright. It was everything but that.

That night Sheila knew for the first time what loneliness really means. She pined in solitude, an early widow.

The train was late in arriving and the company was ordered to report at the theater in half an hour. The company-manager informed Sheila that her trunk would be sent to her hotel as soon as possible. She thanked him curtly, and he growled to Batterson:

"She's playing the prima donna already."

She was all befuddled by this new tangle. How was she to smuggle her trunk from the hotel to her husband's lodgings, and where were they? He had arranged to leave a letter at the theater instructing her where they were to pitch their tent. She went directly to the theater.

She found a corpulent envelope in the mail-box at the stage door. It was full of mourning for the lost hours and full of enthusiasm over the cozy nook Bret had discovered in the outer edge of town. He implored her to make haste.

As she set out to find a telephone and explain to him the delay for rehearsal, she was called back by Reben to the dark stage where Batterson and Prior and Eldon were gathered under the glimmer of a few lights on an iron standard. They were discussing a new bit of business.

Sheila was aflame with impatience, but she could not leave. Before the council of war was finished the general rehearsal was called—a distracting ordeal, with the company crowded to the footlights and struggling to remember

lines and cues in the battle-like clamor of getting the scenery in, making the new drops fast to the ropes and hoisting them away to the flies. Hammers were pounding, canvases going up, stage-hands shouting and interrupting.

The rehearsal was vexatious enough in all conscience, but its crudities were aggravated by the icy realization that this was the final rehearsal before the production. In a few hours the multitude of empty chairs would be occupied by the big jury.

Under this strain the actors developed disheartening lapses of memory that promised complications at night. When the lines had been parroted over, Reben spoke a few words like a dubious king addressing his troops before battle. The stage-manager sang out with unwonted comradery:

"Go to it, folks, and good luck!"

Sheila dashed to the stage door, only to be called again by Reben. He offered to walk to the hotel with her. She dared not refuse. He invited her to dine with him. She said that she would be dining in her room. In the lobby of the hotel he had much to say and kept her waiting. He was trying to cheer up a poor fluttering girl about to go through the fire. He found her peculiarly ill at ease.

At last she escaped him and flew to her room to telephone Bret. She knew he must be boiling over by now. Pennock met her with exciting news. Certain articles of her costume had not arrived as promised. Shopping must be done at once, since the stores were about to close.

All things must yield to the battle-needs, and Sheila postponed telephoning Bret; it was the one postponable duty. By the time she had finished her purchases it was too late to make the trip out to the cozy nook he had selected. She was bitterly disappointed on his account—and her own.

She reached the telephone at last, only to learn that he had gone out, leaving a message that if his wife called up she was to be told to come to their lodgings at once. But this she could not do. And she could not find him to explain why.

He found her at last by telephone, and when she described her plight to him he was furious with disappointment and wrath. He had bought flowers lavishly and decorated the rooms and the table where they were to have had peace at last for a while. Nullified hope sickened him.

He could not visit her at the theater during her make-up periods or between the acts. He had to skulk about during the performance, dodging Reben, who watched the play from the front and shifted his position from time to time to get various points of view, and overhear what the people said.

Numberless mishaps punctuated the opening performance of "The Woman Pays," as the play had been relabeled for the sixth time at the eleventh hour. Lines were forgotten and twisted, and characters called out of their names.

In the scene where Eldon was to propose to Sheila and she to accept him, the distraite Sheila, unable to remember a line exactly, gave its general meaning. Unfortunately she used a phrase that was one of Eldon's cues later on. He answered it mechanically as he had been rehearsed, and then gave Sheila the right cue for the wrong scene. Her memory went on from there and she heard herself accepting Eldon before he had proposed. He realized the blunder at the same time.

They paused, stared, hesitated, wondering how to get back to the starting-point, and improvised desperately while the prompter stood helpless in the wings, not knowing where to throw what line. Reben swore silently and perspired. The audience blamed itself for its bewilderment.

But even amid such confusion Sheila was fascinating. There was no doubt of that. When she appeared the spectators sat forward, the whole face of the house beamed and smiled "welcome" with instant hospitality. Reben recognized the mysterious power and told Starr Coleman and the house-manager that Kemble was a gold-mine.

Bret felt his heart go out to the brave, pretty thing she was up there, sparkling and glowing and making people happy. He was proud that she belonged to him. He felt sorry for the public because it had to lose her. But he was not the public's keeper. He was glad he had made her cut out that embrace with Eldon—both of the embraces.

The last curtain fell just before the lovers moved into each other's open arms. This was the "artistic" effect that Sheila had persuaded Reben to try. Even Bret felt a lurch of disappointment in the audience. There was applause, but the rising curtain disclosed the actors bowing. There was something wanting. Bret would have regretted it himself if he had not been the husband of the star.

He was aching with impatience to see her and tell her how wonderful she was. He did not dare go back on the stage, lest his presence in Grand Rapids should require explaining. He must wait in the alley—he, the owner of the star, must wait in the alley!

He hated the humiliation of his position, and thanked Heaven that after this season Sheila would be at home with him. He hoped that it would not take her long to slip into her street clothes.

He was the more eager to see her as he had prepared a little banquet in their rooms. In his over-abundant leisure he had bought a chafing-dish and the other things necessary to a supper. Everything was set out, ready. He chuckled as he trudged up and down the alley and pictured Sheila's delight, and the cozy housewifeliness of

her as she should light the lamp and stir the chafing-dish. They would begin very light housekeeping at once, with never a servant to mar their communion.

But Sheila did not come. None of the company emerged from the stage door. It was long after twelve and nobody had appeared. He did not know that the company had been held after the performance for criticism. Aligned in all its fatigue and after-slump, it waited to be harangued by Reben while the "grips" whisked away the scenery. Reben read the copious notes he had made. He spared no one. Every member in turn was rebuked for something, and he carefully refrained from any words of approval lest the company should become conceited.

Reben believed in lashing his horses to their tasks. Others believe otherwise and succeed as well, but Reben was known as a "slave-driver." He paid good prices for his slaves and it was a distinction to belong to him; but he worked them hard.

Batterson and Prior had also made notes on the performance and the dismal actors received spankings one after another. Sheila was not overlooked. Rather she was subjected to extra severity because she carried the success or failure on her young shoulders.

As usual, the first performance found the play too long. The first rough cuts were announced and a rehearsal called for the next morning at ten.

It was half past twelve when the forlorn and worn-out players were permitted to slink off to their dressing-rooms.

Sheila knew that her poor Bret must have been posting the alley outside like a caged hyena. She was so tired and dejected that she hardly cared. She sent Pennock out to explain. Pennock could not find him. She did not look long. She did not like him. When at length Sheila was dressed for the street she found Reben waiting for her with the news that he had ordered a little supper in a private room at the hotel, so that she and Batterson, Prior and Eldon and the company-manager and the press

agent, Starr Coleman, and the house-manager, might discuss the play while it was fresh in their minds.

Sheila had never sat on one of these inquests before, and she had not foreseen the call to this one. Such conferences are as necessary in the theater as a meeting of generals after a hard day's battle. Long after the critics have turned in their diatribes or eulogies and gone home to bed, the captains of the drama are comparing notes, quoting what the audience has said, searching out flaws and discussing them, often with more asperity than the roughest critic reveals.

In these anxious night-watches the fate of the new play may be settled, and advance, retreat, or surrender decided upon.

Sheila, thinking of her poor husband, asked Reben to excuse her from the conference.

His look of amazement and his sharp "Why?" found her without any available excuse. She drearily consented and was led along.

During and after the cold supper everybody had much to say except Sheila. Endless discussions arose on minutely unimportant points or upon great vague principles of the drama and of public appeal. At three o'clock Sheila began to doze and wake in short agonies. There was a hint of daybreak in the sky when the meeting broke up. She was too sleepy to care much whether she lived or died or had a husband or had just lost one. She made a somnambulistic effort to search for Bret, but Reben and the others had adjourned to the hotel lobby for further debate and she dared not challenge their curiosity.

She went to the room the manager had reserved for her and slept there like a Juliet on her tomb.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE next morning Pennock did not call Sheila till the last moment. Then her breakfast was on the table and her bath in the tub. The old dragon had again forbidden the telephone operator to ring the bell, and the bell-boys that came to the door with messages from Bret she shooed away.

Sheila found on her breakfast-tray a small stack of notes from Bret. They ranged from incredulous amazement at her neglect to towering rage.

Sheila was still new enough to wedlock to feel sorrier for him than for herself. She had a dim feeling that Bret had in him the makings of a very difficult specimen of that most difficult class, the prima donna's husband. But she blamed her profession and hated the theater and Reben for tormenting her poor, patient, devoted, long-suffering lover.

Yet as the soldier bridegroom, however he hates the war, obeys his captain none the less, so Sheila never dreamed of mutiny. She was an actor's daughter and no treachery could be worse than to desert a manager, a company, and a work of art at the crisis of the whole investment. She regretted that she was not even giving her whole mind and ambition to her work. But how could she with her husband in such a plight?

She wrote Bret a little note of mad regret, abject apology, and insane devotion, and asked Pennock to get it to him at once.

Pennock growled: "You better give that young man

to me. You'll never have time to see him. And his jealousy is simply dretful."

At the theater Sheila met Reben in a morning-after mood. He had had little sleep and he was sure that the play was hopeless. The only thing that could have cured him would have been a line of people at the box-office. The lobby was empty, and few spaces can look quite so empty as a theater lobby. The box-office man spoke to him, too, with a familiarity based undoubtedly on the notices.

One of the papers published a fulsome eulogy that Starr Coleman would not have dared to submit. Of the opposite tenor was the slashing abuse of a more important paper that nursed one of those critics of which each town has at least a single specimen—the local Archilochus whose similar ambition seems to be to drive the objects of his satire to suicide.

His chief support is his knowledge that his readers enjoy his vigor in pelting transient actors as a small boy throws rocks at express trains. His highest reward is the town boast, "We got a critic can roast an actor as good as anybuddy in N'York, and ain't afraid to do it, either."

As children these humorists first show their genius by placing bent pins on chairs; later they pull the chairs from under old ladies and start baby-carriages on a downward path. Every day is April fool to them.

Reben was always arguing that critics had nothing to do with success or failure and always ready to document his argument, and always trembled before them, none the less. It is small wonder that critics learn to secrete vitriol, since their praise makes so little effect and only their acid etches.

Reben had tossed aside the paper that praised his company and his play, but he clipped the hostile articles. The play-roaster began, as usual, with a pun on the title, "The Woman Pays but the audience won't."

As a matter of fact, Reben was about convinced that

the play was a failure. It had succeeded in France because it was written for the French. The process of adaptation had taken away its Gallic brilliance without adding any Anglo-Saxon trickery. Reben would make a fight for it, before he gave up, but he had a cold, dismal intuition which he summed up to Batterson in that simple fatal phrase:

"It won't do."

He did not tell Sheila so, lest he hurt her work, but he told Prior that the play was deficient in viscera—only he used the grand old Anglo-Saxon phrasing.

He gave Prior some ideas for the visceration of the play and set him to work on a radical reconstruction, chiefly involving a powerful injection of heart-interest. Till this was ready there was no use meddling with details.

When Sheila reached the theater the rehearsal was brief and perfunctory. Reben explained the situation, and told her to take a good rest and give a performance at night. He had only one suggestion:

"Put more pep in the love-scenes and restore the clutch at the last curtain."

Sheila gasped, "But I thought it was so much more artistic the way we played it last night."

Reben laughed: "Ah, behave! When the curtain fell last night the thud could be heard a mile. The people thought it fell by accident. If the box-office hadn't been closed they'd have hollered for their money back. You jump into Eldon's arms to-night and hug as hard as you can. The same to you, Eldon. It's youth and love they come to see, not artistic omissions."

Sheila felt grave misgivings as to the effect of the restoration on her own arch-critic and private audience. But she rejoiced at being granted a holiday. She telephoned to Bret from a drug-store.

"I've got a day off, honey. Isn't it gee-lo-rious!"

Then she sped to him as fast as a taxicab could take her. He had an avalanche of grievances waiting for her,

but the sight of her beauty running home to him melted the stored-up snows. The chafing-dish was still in place after its all-night vigil, and it cooked a luncheon that rivaled quails and manna.

That afternoon Bret chartered a motor and they rode afar. They talked much of their first moonlight ride. It was still moonlight about them, though people better acquainted with the region would have called it afternoon sunlight. When Bret kissed her now she did not complain or threaten. In fact, she complained and threatened when he did not kiss her.

They dined outside the city walls and scudded home in the sunset. Sheila would not let Bret take her near the theater, lest he be seen. Indeed, she begged him not to go to the theater at all that night, but to spend the hours of waiting at the vaudeville or some moving-picture house. He protested that he did not want her out of his sight.

The reason she gave was not the real one: "Everybody always plays badly at a second performance, honey. I'd hate to have you see how badly I can play. Please don't go to-night."

He consented sulkily; she had a hope that the romantic emphasis Reben had commanded and the final embrace would fail so badly that he would not insist on their retention. She did not want Bret to see the experiment. But there was no denying that warmth helped the play immensely. Sheila's increased success distressed her. Her marriage had tied all her ambitions into such a snarl that she could be true neither to Bret nor to Reben and least of all to herself.

Reben was jubilant. "What d'I tell you? That's what they pay for; a lot of heart-throbs and one or two big punches. We'll get 'em yet. Will you have a bite of supper with us to-night?"

"Thanks ever so much," said Sheila. "I have an engagement with—friends."

She simply had not the courage to use the singular.

Reben laughed: "So long as it's not just one. By the by, where were you all day? I tried all afternoon to get you at the hotel. I wanted to take you out for a little fresh air."

"That's awfully nice of you, but I got the air. I—I was motoring."

"With friendzz?" he asked, peculiarly.

"Naturally not with enemies."

She thought that rather quick work. But he gave her a suspicious look.

"Remember, Sheila—your picture is pasted all over town. These small cities are gossip-factories. Be careful. Remember the old saying, if you can't be good, be careful."

She blushed scarlet and protested, "Mr. Reben!"

He apologized in haste, convinced that his suspicions were outrageous, and glad to be wrong. He added: "I've got good news for you: the office sale for to-morrow's matinée and night shows a little jump. That tells the story. When the business grows, we can laugh at the critics."

"Fine!" said Sheila, half-heartedly. Then she hurried from the theater to the carriage waiting at the appointed spot. The door opened magically and she was drawn into the dark and cuddled into the arms of her "friends," her family, her world.

After the first informalities Bret asked, "Well, how did it go?"

"Pretty well, everybody said. But it needs a lot of work. Reben is sure we've got a success, eventually."

"That's good," Bret sighed.

When they reached the hotel they found that they had neglected to provide supplies for the chafing-dish. Sheila was hungry.

"We're old married people now," said Sheila. "Let's have supper in the dining-room. There'll be nobody we know in this little hotel."

They took supper in the little dining-room. There were only two other people there. Sheila noted that they stared at her with frank delight and plainly kept talking about her. She was used to it; Winfield did not see anybody on earth but Sheila.

"Kind of nice being together in public like decent people," he beamed.

"Isn't it?" she gleamed.

"Let's have another motor-ride to-morrow afternoon."

"I can't, honey. It's matinée day."

"We'll get up early and go in the morning, then."

"Oh, but I've got to sleep as late as I can, honey! It's a hard day for me."

The next morning they had breakfast served in their apartment at twelve o'clock. She called it breakfast. It was lunch for Bret.

He had stolen out of the darkened room at eight and gone down to his breakfast in the café. He had dawdled about the town, buying her flowers and gifts. When he got back at eleven she was still asleep. She looked as if she had been drowned.

He sat in the dim light till it was time to call her. They were eating grapefruit out of the same spoon when the telephone rang. A gruff voice greeted Bret:

"Is this Mr. Winfield?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Is—Miss—is Sheila there?"

"Ye—yes. Who are you?"

"Mr. Reben."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THAT morning Reben had wakened early with a head full of inspirations. He was fairly lyrical with ideas. He wanted to talk them over with Sheila. He called up her room. Pennock answered the telephone.

"Can I speak to Miss Kemble?"

"She—she's not up yet."

"Oh! Well, as soon as she is up have her let me know. I want a word with her."

"Yes, sir."

Pennock, in dismay, called up Winfield's hotel to forewarn Sheila. But Winfield had gone out, leaving word that his wife was not to be disturbed. Pennock left a message that she was to call up Miss Pennock as soon as she was disturbable. The message was put in Winfield's box. When he came in he did not stop at the desk to inquire for messages, since he expected none.

Reben grew more and more eager to explain his new ideas to Sheila. He called up Pennock again.

"Isn't Miss Kemble up yet?"

"Oh yes," said Pennock.

"I want to speak to her."

The distracted Pennock groped for the nearest excuse:

"She—she's gone out."

"But I told you to tell her! Didn't you tell her I wanted to speak to her?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing, sir; nothing," Pennock faltered. She had told one big lie that morning and her invention was exhausted.

"That's damned funny," Reben growled. Slapping the receiver on the hook, he went to the cigar-stand, fuming, and bought a big black cigar to bite on.

When plays are failures one's friends avoid one. When plays are successes strangers crowd forward with congratulations. The cigar girl said to the angry manager, who had given her free tickets the night before: "That's a lovely show, Mr. Reben. I had a lovely time, and Miss Kemble is simpully love-la."

A stranger who was poking a cheap cigar into the general chopper spoke in: "I was there last night, too—me and the wife. You the manager?"

Reben nodded impatiently.

The stranger went on: "That's a great little star you got there—Miss Kemble—or Mrs. Winfield, I suppose I'd ought to say."

Reben looked his surprise. "Mrs. Winfield?"

"Yes. She's stopping at our hotel with her husband. Right nice-lookin' feller. Actor, too, I s'pose? I'm on here buying furniture. I always stop at the Emerton. Right nice hotel. Prices reasonable; food fair to middlin'. Has she been married long?"

But Reben had moved off. He was in a mood to believe any bad rumor. This, being the worst news imaginable, sounded true. He felt queasy with business disgust and with plain old-fashioned moral shock. He rushed for the telephone-booth and clawed at the book till he found the number of the Emerton Hotel. He was puffing with anxious wrath.

When Winfield answered, Reben almost collapsed. While he waited he took his temper under control. When he heard Sheila's voice quivering with all the guilt in the world he mumbled, quietly:

"Oh, Sheila, I'd like to have a word with you."

"Wh-where?" Sheila quivered.

"Here. No — at the theater. No — yes, at the theater."

"All right," she mumbled. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

CHAPTER XXXVII

SHEILA went to the theater with the joyous haste of a child going up to the teacher's desk for punishment. She wondered how Reben could have learned of the marriage. She wished she had told him of it when it was celebrated. She felt that poor Reben had a just grievance against her. It would be only fair to let him scold his anger out, and bear his tirade in quiet resignation.

Bret thought that he might as well come along, since he had been unearthed. But Sheila would not permit him to enter the theater lest Reben and he fall to blows. She did not want Reben to be beaten up. She left Bret in the alley, and promised to call for him if she were attacked.

The theater was quite deserted at this hour. Sheila found Reben pacing the corridor before her dressing-room. She advanced toward him timidly with shame that he misinterpreted. He fairly lashed her with his glare and groaned in all contempt:

"My God, Sheila, I'd never have thought it of you!"

"Thought what?" Sheila gasped.

He laughed harshly: "And you called me down for insulting you! And you got away with it! But, say, you ought to use your brains if you're going to play a game like that. Coarse work, Sheila; coarse work!"

Sheila bit her lip to keep back the resentment boiling up in her heart.

He went on with his denunciation: "I warned you that you would be known everywhere you went. I told you your picture was all over town. And now your name is.

A stranger comes up to me and says he saw you and your—your 'husband,' Mr. Winfield? Who's the man? What's his real name?"

"Mr. Winfield, of course."

"Oh, of course! Where did you meet him? Does he live here?"

"Live here! Indeed, he doesn't!"

"He followed you here, then?"

"He preceded me here."

"It's as bad as that, eh? Well, you leave him here, at once. If he comes near you again I'll break every bone in his body."

Sheila laughed. "You haven't seen my husband, have you?"

"Your husband?" Reben laughed. "Are you going to try to bluff it out with me, too?"

Sheila blenched at this. "He is my husband!" she stormed. "And you'd better not let him hear you talk so to me."

Reben's knees softened under him. "Sheila! you don't mean that you've gone and got yourself married!"

"What else should I mean? How dare you think anything else?"

"Oh, you fool! you fool! you little damned fool!"

"Thanks!"

"You little sneaking traitor. Didn't you promise me, on your word of honor—"

"I promised to carry out my contract. And here I am."

"I ought to break that contract myself."

"You couldn't please me better."

He stood over her and glowered while his fingers twitched. She stared back at him pugnaciously. Then he mourned over her. She was both his lost love and his lost ward. His regret broke out in a groan:

"Why did you do this, Sheila? Why, why—in God's name, why?"

Sheila had no answer. He might as well have shouted at her: "Why does the earth roll toward the east? Why does gravity haul the worlds together and keep them apart? Why are flowers? or June? what's the reason for June?"

Sheila knew why no more than the rose knows why.

At length Reben's business instinct came to the rescue of his heartbreak. He thought of his investment, of his contracts, of his hoped-for profits. His experience as a manager had taught him to be another Job. He ignored her challenge, and groaned, "How are we going to keep this crime a secret?"

Sheila, seeing that he had surrendered, forgot her anger. "Have we got to?"

"Of course we have. You know it won't help you any to be known as a married woman. O Lord! what fools these mortals be! We've got to keep it dark at least till the play gets over in New York. If it's a hit it won't matter so much; if it's a flivver, it will matter still less."

He was heartsick at her folly and her double-dealing. Such things and worse had happened to him and to other managers. They force managers to be cynical and to drive hard bargains while they can. Like captains of ships, they are always at the ultimate mercy of any member of the crew. But they must make voyages somehow.

Feeling the uselessness of wasting reproaches, Reben left Sheila and groped through the dark house to the lobby. There he found a most interesting spectacle—a line at the box-office. It was a convincing argument. Sheila had draught. Even with a poor play in an unready condition, she drew the people to the box-office. He must make the most of her treason.

But his heart was sick. He was managing a married star. This was double trouble with half the fun.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NOW that the cat was out of the bag, and the husband out of the closet, Sheila decided to produce Bret at the train the next morning. He was about to get a taste of the gipsying life known as "trouping" and he was to learn the significance of the one-night stand.

He had felt so shamefaced for his part in the deception of Reben that when he visited the play during the evening performance, and saw the much-discussed embrace restored, he had no heart to make a vigorous protest. And Sheila was too weary after the two performances to be hectored. It was heartbreaking to him to see her so exhausted.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked, helplessly.

"Petoskey," she yawned.

"Petoskey!" he gasped. "That's in Russia. In Heaven's name, do we—"

He was ready to believe in almost anything imbecile. But she explained that their Petoskey was in Michigan. He did not approve of Michigan.

His hatred of his wife's profession began to take deeper root. It flourished exceedingly when they had to get up for the train the next morning at six. It was hard enough for him to begin the new day. Sheila's struggles to fight off sleep were desperate. Sleep was like an octopus whose many arms took new hold as fast as they were torn loose. Bret was so sorry for her that he begged her to let the company go without her. She could take a later train. But even her sad face was crinkled with a smile at the impossibility of this suggestion.

Breakfast was the sort of meal usually flung together by servants alarm-clocked earlier than their wont. For all their gulping and hurry, Bret and Sheila nearly missed the train. It was moving as they clambered aboard.

"Which is the parlor-car?" Bret asked the brakeman.

"Ain't none."

"Do you mean to say that we've got to ride all day in a day coach?"

"That's about it, Cap."

Bret was furious. Worse yet, the train was so crowded that it was impossible for them even to have a double space. Their suit-cases had to be distributed at odd points in racks, under seats, and at the end of the car.

Bret remembered that he had forgotten to get his ticket, but the business-manager, Mr. McNish, passed by and offered his congratulations and a free transportation, with Mr. Reben's compliments. Bret did not want to be beholden to Mr. Reben, but Sheila prevailed on him not to be ungracious.

When the conductor came along the aisle she said, "Company."

"Both?" said the conductor, and she smiled, "Yes," and giggled, adding to Bret, "You're one of the troupe now."

Bret did not seem to be flattered.

Reben came down the aisle to meet the bridegroom. He was doing his best to take his defeat gracefully. Bret could not even take his triumph so.

Other members of the company drifted forward and offered their felicitations. They made themselves at home in the coach, sitting about on the arms of seats and exchanging family jokes.

The rest of the passengers craned their necks to stare at the bridegroom, crimson with shame and anger. Bret loathed being stared at. Sheila did not like it, but she was used to it. Both writhed at the well-meant humor and the good wishes of the actors and actresses. Their

effusiveness offended Bret mortally. He could have proclaimed himself the luckiest man on earth, but he objected to being called so by these actors. If he had been similarly heckled by people of any sort—college friends, club friends, doctors, lawyers, merchants—he would have resented their manner, for everybody hazes bridal couples. But since he had fallen among actors, he blamed actors for his distress.

Eldon alone failed to come forward with good wishes, and Bret was unreasonable enough to take umbrage at that. Why did Eldon remain aloof? Was he jealous? What right had he to be jealous?

Altogether, the bridegroom was doing his best to make rough weather of his halcyon sea. Sheila was at her wits' end to cheer him who should have been cheering her.

At noon a few sandwiches of the railroad sort were obtained by a dash to a station lunch-counter. Bret apologized to Sheila, but she assured him that he was not to blame and was not to mind such little troubles; they were part of the business. He minded them none the less and he hated the business.

The town of Petoskey, when they reached it, did not please him in any respect. The hotel pleased him less. When he asked for two rooms with bath the clerk snickered and gave him one without. He explained with contempt, "They's a bath-room right handy down the hall and baths are a quarter extry."

It was a riddle whether it were cleanlier to keep the grime one had or fly to a bath-room one knew not of. When Bret and Sheila appeared at the screen door which kept the flies in the dining-room they were beckoned down the line by an Amazonian head waitress. She planted them among a group of grangers who stared at Sheila and picked their teeth snappily.

The dinner was a small-hotel dinner—a little bit of a lot of things in a flotilla of small dishes.

The audience at the theater was sparse and indifferent. The play had begun to bore Winfield. It irritated him to see Sheila repeating the same love-scenes night after night —especially with that man Eldon.

After the play supper was to be had nowhere except at a cheap and ill-conditioned little all-night restaurant where there was nothing to eat but egg sandwiches and pie, the pastry thicker and hardly more digestible than the resounding stone china it was served on.

The bedroom at the hotel was ill ventilated, the plush furniture greasy, the linen coarse, and the towels few and new. Bret declared it outrageous that his beautiful, his exquisite bride should be so shabbily housed, fed like a beggar, and bedded like a poor relation. Almost all of his ill temper was on her account, and she could not but love him for it.

After a dolefully realistic night came again the poignant tragedy of early rising, another gulped breakfast, another dash for the train. The driver of the hack never came. Bret and Sheila waited for him till it was necessary to run all the way to the station. The station was handier to the railroad than to the hotel. Since red-caps were an institution unknown to Petoskey, they carried their own baggage.

The itinerary of the day included a change of trains and an eventual arrival at no less—and no more—a place than Sheboygan.

There they found a county fair in progress and the hotels packed. Decent rooms were not to be had at any price. It took much beseeching even to secure a shelter in a sample-room filled with long tables for drummers to display their wares on. They waited like mendicants for luncheon in an overcrowded dining-room where over-driven waitresses cowed the timorous guests. Sheila had not time to finish her luncheon before she must hurry away to a rehearsal. Bret left his and went with her, racing along the streets and growling:

"Why is Reben such a fool as to play in towns like this?"

"He has to play somewhere, honey, to whip the play into shape," Sheila panted.

"Well, he's whipping you out of shape."

"I don't mind, dearest. It's fun to me. It's all part of the business."

"Well, I want you to get out of the business. It's unfit for a decent woman."

"Oh—honey!"

It was a feeble little wail from a great hurt. Plainly Bret would never comprehend the majestic qualities of her art, or realize that its inconveniences were no more than the minor hardships of an army on a great campaign.

At the rehearsal the first of Prior's new scenes was gone over. It emphasized the "heart-interest" with a vengeance. Sheila trembled to think what her husband would do when he saw it played. She was glad that it was not to be tried until the following week. Every moment of postponement for the inevitable storm was so much respite.

They rehearsed all afternoon. The struggle for dinner was more trying than for the luncheon. The performance was early and hasty, as it was necessary to catch a train immediately after the last curtain, in order to reach Bay City for the Saturday matinée. Worse yet, they had to leave the car at four o'clock in the morning.

This time it was Bret who was hard to waken. His big body was so famished for sleep that Sheila was afraid she would have to leave him on the train. She was wiry, and her enthusiasm for the battle gave her a courage that her disgusted husband lacked. There was no carriage at the station and Bret stumbled and swore drowsily at the dark streets and the intolerable conditions.

He had nothing to interest him except the infinite annoyances and exactions of his wife's career. There was

nothing to reward him for his privations except to lumber along in her wake like a coal-barge hauled by a tug.

His pride was mutinous, and it seemed a degradation to permit his bride to run from place to place as if she were a fugitive from justice. He had wealth and the habit of luxury, and his idea of a honeymoon was the ultimate opposite of this frenzied gipsying.

He had always understood that actors were a lazy folk whose life was one of easy vagabondage, with all the vices that indolence fosters. Three days of trouping had wrecked his strength; yet he had done none of the work but the travel.

When he protested the next morning at early breakfast that the tour would be the death of them both Sheila looked up from the part she was studying and laughed:

"Cheer up! The worst is yet to come. We haven't made any long jumps yet. The route-sheet says we leave Bay City at one o'clock to-night and get to Ishpeming at half past four to-morrow afternoon. We rehearse Sunday night and all day Monday, play that night, and take a train at midnight back to Menominee. From there we rush back to Calumet, and then on to Duluth."

Bret set his coffee-cup down hard and growled, "Well, this is where I leave you."

He spoke truer than he knew. He had kept his family informed of his whereabouts by night-letters, in which he alluded to the blissful time he ought to have been having. When he took Sheila to the theater for the matinée he found a telegram for him.

He winced at the address: "Bret Winfield, Esq., care of Miss Sheila Kemble, Opera House, Bay City." He forgot the pinch of pride when he read the message:

Please come home at once your father dangerously ill and asking for you.

MOTHER.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SHEILA saw the anguish of dread cover his face like a sudden fling of ashes. He handed the telegram to her, and she put her arms about his shoulders to uphold him and shelter him from the sledge of fate.

"Poor old dad!" he groaned. "And mother! I must take the first train."

She nodded her head dismally.

He read the telegram again in a stupor, and mumbled, "I wish you could come with me."

"If I only could!"

"You ought to," he urged.

"Oh, I know it—but I can't."

"You may never see my father again."

"Don't say that! He'll get well, honey; you mustn't think anything else. Oh, it's too bad! it's just too bad!"

He felt lonely and afraid of what was ahead of him. He was afraid of his father's death, and of a funeral. He was terrified at the thought of his mother's woe. He could feel her clutching at him helplessly, frantically, and telling him that he was all she had left. His eyes filled with tears at the vision and they blinded him to everything but the vision. He put his hands out through the mist and caught Sheila's arms and pleaded:

"You ought to come with me, now of all times."

She could only repeat and repeat: "I know it, but I can't, I can't. You see that I can't, don't you, honey?"

His voice was harsh when he answered: "No, I don't see why you can't. Your place is there."

She cast her eyes up and beat her palms together hope-

lessly over the complete misunderstanding that thwarted the union of their souls. She took his hands again and squeezed them passionately.

Reben came upon them, swinging his cane. Seeing the two holding hands, he essayed a frivolity. "Honeymoon not on the wane yet?"

Sheila told him the truth. He was all sympathy at once. His race made him especially tender to filial love, and his grief brought tears to his eyes. He crushed Bret's hands in his own and poured out sorrow like an ointment. His deep voice trembled with fellowship:

"If I could only do anything to help you!"

Winfield caught at the proffer. "You can! Let Sheila go home with me."

Reben gasped. "My boy, my boy! It's impossible! The matinée begins in half an hour. She should be making up now."

"Let somebody else play her part."

"There is no understudy ready. We never select the understudy for the try-out performances. Sheila, you must understand."

"I do, of course; but poor Bret—he can't seem to."

"Oh, all right, I understand," Winfield sighed with a resignation that terrified Sheila. "What train can I get? Do you know?"

Reben knew the trains. He would get the company-manager to secure the tickets. Bret must go by way of Detroit. He could not leave till after five. He would reach Buffalo early Sunday morning and be home in the late afternoon.

The big fellow's frame shook with anxiety. So much could happen in twenty-four hours. It would seem a year to his poor mother. He hurried away to send her a telegram. Sheila paused at the stage door, staring after his forlorn figure; then she darted in to her task.

Bret came back shortly and dropped into a chair in Sheila's dressing-room. His eyes, dulled with grief,

watched her as she plastered on her face the various layers of color, spreading the carmine on cheek and ear with savage brilliance, penciling her eyelashes till thick beads of black hung from them, painting her eyelids blue above and below, and smearing her lips with scarlet.

He turned from her, sick with disgust.

Sheila felt his aversion, and it choked her when she tried to comfort him. She painted her arms and shoulders white and powdered them till clouds of dust rose from the puff. Pennock made the last hooks fast and Sheila rose for the final primpings of coquetry.

Pennock opened the door of the dressing-room to listen for the cue. When the time came Sheila sighed, ran to Bret, clasped him in a tight embrace, and kissed his wet forehead. Her arms left white streaks across his coat, and her lips red marks on his face.

He followed to watch her make her entrance. She stood a moment between the flats, turned and stared her adoration at him through her viciously leaded eyelashes, and wafted him a sad kiss. Then she caught up her train and began to laugh softly as from a distance. She ran out into the glow of artificial noon, laughing. A faint applause greeted her, the muffled applause of a matinée audience's gloved hands.

Bret watched her, heard her voice sparkle, heard it greeted with waves of hilarity. He could not realize how broken-hearted she was for him. He could not understand how separate a thing her stage emotions were from her personal feelings.

Good news would not have helped her comedy; bad news could hardly alter it. She went through her well-learned lines and intonations as a first-class soldier does the manual of arms without reference to his love or grief.

All Bret knew was that his wife was out there, laughing and causing laughter, while far away his mother was sobbing—sobbing perhaps above the chill clay of his father.

He hurried from the stage door to pack his trunk. He went cursing the theater, and himself for lingering in its infamous shadow. He did not come back till the play was over and Sheila in her street clothes. In her haste she had overlooked traces of her make-up—that odious blue about the eyes, the pink edging of the ears, the lead on the eyelashes.

Once more Sheila went to the train with her husband. They clung together in fierce farewells, repeated and repeated till the train was moving and the porter must run alongside to help Bret aboard.

When he looked back he could not see Sheila's pathetic figure and her sad face. When he thought of her he thought of her laughing in her motley. All the next day he thought of her in the theater rehearsing.

He loved her perhaps the more for that unattainable soul of hers. He had won her, wed her, possessed her, made her his in body and name; but her soul was still uncaptured. He vowed and vowed again that he would make her altogether his. She was his wife; she should be like other wives.

When he reached home his father was dead. His mother was too weak with grief to rebuke him for being on a butterfly-hunt at such a time.

He knelt by her bed and held her in his arms while she told him of his father's long fight to keep alive till his boy came back. She begged him not to leave her again, and he promised her that he would make her home his.

The days that ensued were filled with tasks of every solemn kind. There was the funeral to prepare for and endure, and after that the assumption of all his father's wealth. This came to him, not as a mighty treasure to squander, but as a delicate invalid to nurture and protect.

Sheila's telegrams and letters were incessant and so full of devotion for him that they had room for little about herself.

She told him she was working hard and missing him

terribly, and what her next address would be. She tried vainly to mask her increasing terror of the dreadful opening in Chicago.

He wished that he might be with her, yet knew that he had no real help to give her. He prayed for her success, but with a mental reservation that if the play were the direst failure he would not be sorry, for it would bring them to peace the sooner.

He tried to school his undisciplined mind to the Herculean task of learning in a few days what his father had acquired by a life of toil. The factory ran on smoothly under the control of its superintendents, but big problems concerning the marketing of the output, consolidation with the trust, and enlargement of the plant, were rising every hour. These matters he must decide like an infant king whose ministers disagree.

To his shame and dismay, he could not give his whole heart to the work; his heart was with Sheila. He thought of her without rancor now. He recognized the bravery and honor that had kept her with the company. As she had told him once before, treachery to Reben would be a poor beginning of her loyalty to Bret. The very things he cherished bitterly against her turned sweet in his thoughts. He decided that he could not live without her, and might as well recognize it.

He found himself clenching his hands at his desk and whispering prayers that the play should be a complete failure. How else could they be reunited? He could not shirk his own responsibilities. It was not a man's place to give up his career. There was only one hope—the failure of the play.

But "The Woman Pays" was a success. The Grand Rapids oracle guessed wrong. As sometimes happens, the city critics were kinder than the rural. Sheila sent Bret a double night-telegram. She said that she was sorry to say that the play had "gone over big." She had an enormous ovation; there had been thirty curtain calls;

the audience had made her make a speech. Reben had said the play would earn a mint of money. And then she added that she missed Bret "terribly," and loved him "madly and nothing else mattered."

The next day she telegraphed him that the critics were "wonderful." She quoted some of their eulogies and announced that she was mailing the clippings to him. But she said that she would rather hear him speak one word of praise than have them print a million. He did not believe it, but he liked to read it.

He did not wait to receive the clippings. He gave up opposing his ravenous heart, and took train for Chicago. He could not bear to have everybody except himself acclaiming his wife in superlatives.

He decided to surprise her. He did not even telegraph a warning. Indeed, when he reached Chicago in the early evening, he resolved to see the performance before he let her know he was in town.

He could not get by Mr. McNish, who was "on the door," without being recognized, but he asked McNish not to let "Miss Kemble" know that he was in the house. McNish agreed readily; he did not care to agitate Sheila during the performance. After the last curtain fell her emotions would be her own.

McNish was glowing as he watched the crowd file past the ticket-taker. He chuckled: "It's a sell-out to-night I bet. This afternoon we had the biggest first matinée this theater has known for years. I told Reben two years ago that the little lady was star material. He said he'd never thought of it. She's got personality and she gets it across. She plays herself, and that's the hardest kind of acting there is. I discover her, and Reben cops the credit and the coin. Ain't that life all over?"

Bret agreed that it was, and hurried to his seat. It was in the exact center of a long row. He was completely surrounded by garrulous women trying to outchatter even the strenuous coda of the band.

A fat woman on his right bulged over into his domain and filled the arm of his chair with her thick elbow. A lean woman on his left had an arm some inches too long for her space, and her elbow projected like a spur into Bret's ribs. He could have endured their contiguity if they had omitted their conversation. The overweening woman was chewing gum and language with the same grinding motions, giving her words a kind of stringy quality.

"Jevver see this Sheilar Kemble?" she munched. "I seen her here some time ago. She didn't have a very big part, but she played it perfect. She was simpully gurrand. I says at the time to the gempmum was with me, I says, 'Somebody ought to star that girl.' I guess I must 'a' been overheard, for here she is.

"A lady frien' o' mine went last night, and told me I mustn't miss it. She says they got the handsomest actor playin' the lover—feller name of Weldon or Weldrum or something like that—but anyway she says he makes love something elegant, and so does Sheilar. This frien' o' mine says they must be in love with each other, for nobody could look at one another that way without they meant it. Well, we'll soon see."

To hear his wife's name and Eldon's chewed up together in the gum of a strange plebeian was disgusting.

The sharp-elbowed woman was talking all the while in a voice of affected accents:

"She's almost a lady, this Kemble gull. Really, she was received in the veribest homes hyah lahst wintuh. Yes, I met hah everywhah. She was really quite refined—for an actress, of cawse. Several of the nicest young men made quite fools of themselves—quite. Fawtunately their people saved them from doing anything rahsh. I suppose she'll upset them all again this season. There ought to be some fawm of inoculation to protect young men against actresses. Don't you think so? It's fah more dangerous than typhoid fevah, don't you think so?"

All about him Bret heard Sheila's name tossed carelessly as a public property.

The curtain rose at last and the play began. Sheila made a conspicuously inconspicuous entrance without preparation, without even the laughter she had formerly employed. She was just there. The audience did not recognize her till she spoke, then came a volley of applause.

Bret's eyes filled with tears. She was beautiful. She seemed to be sad. Was she thinking of him? He wanted to clamber across the seats and over the footlights to protect her once more from the mob, not from its ridicule as at that first sight of her, but from its more odious familiarity and possession.

He hardly recognized the revised play. The character she played—and played in her very selfhood—was emotional now, and involved in a harrowing situation with a mystery as to her origin, and hints of a past, a scandal into which an older woman, an adventuress, had decoyed her.

Then Eldon came on the scene and they fell in love at once; but she was afraid of her past, and evaded him for his own sake. He misunderstood her and accused her of despising him because he was poor; and she let him think so, because she wanted him to hate her.

The audience wept with luxurious misery over her saintly double-dealing. The gum-chewer's tears salted her pepsin and she commented: "Ain't it awful what beasts you men are to us trusting girrls! Think of the demon that loored that girrl to her roon!"

The sharp-elbowed woman dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and said that it was "really quite affecting—quite. I've made myself ridiculous." Then she blew her nose as elegantly as that proletarian feat can be accomplished.

Winfield was astounded at the changes in the play. A few new scenes altered the whole meaning of it. Everything pink before was purple now. The rôles of Sheila

and Eldon had been rendered melodramatic. Sheila's comedy was accomplished now in a serious way. With a quaint little pout, or two steps to the side and a turn of the head, she threw the audience into convulsions.

Suddenly Sheila would quench the hilarity with a word, and the hush would be enormous and strangely anxious; then the handkerchiefs would come out.

Bret would have felt with the mob had the actress been any woman on earth but his own. That made all the difference in the world. He told himself that she was the victim of her art. But his ire burned against Eldon, since Eldon made love to her for nearly three hours. And he said and did noble things that made her love him more and more. And there was no lack of caresses now.

In the second act Eldon overtook the fugitive Sheila and claimed her for his own. She broke loose and ran from him, weeping, because she felt "unworthy of a good man's love." But she followed him with eyes of doglike adoration. Her hands quivered toward him and she held them back "for his dear sake." Then he caught her again and would not let her escape. He held her by both hands.

"Mary!"—that was her name in the play. "Mary," he cried, "I love you. The sight of you fills my eyes with longing. The touch of your hand sets my very soul on fire. I love you. I can't live without you!"

He seized her in his arms, crushed her fiercely. She struggled a moment, then began to yield, to melt toward him. She lifted her eyes to his—then turned them away again. The audience could read in them passion fighting against renunciation. She murmured:

"Oh, Jack! Jack! I—"

He pressed his conquest. "You do love me! You must! You can't scorn a love like mine. I have seen you weeping. I can read in your eyes that you love me. Your eyes belong to me. Your lips are mine. Give them to me! Kiss me! Kiss me—Ma-ry!"

She quivered with surrender. The audience burned

with excitement. The lover urged his cause with select language.

It was the sort of thing the women in the audience did not get from their own lovers or husbands; the sort of thing the men in the audience wanted to be able to say in a crisis and could not. Therefore, for all its banality, it thrilled them. They ate it up. It was a sentimental banquet served at this emotion restaurant every evening.

At length, as Eldon repeated his demand in tones that swept the sympathetic strings in every bosom to response, Mary began to yield; her hands climbed Eldon's arms slowly, paused on his shoulders. In a moment they would plunge forward and clasp him about the neck.

Her lips were lifted, pursed to meet his. And then—as the audience was about to scream with suspense—she thrust herself away from him, broke loose, moaning:

"No, I am unworthy—no, no—I can't, I don't love you—no—no!"

The curtain fell on another flight.

Bret wanted to push through the crowd and go back to the stage to forbid the play from going on. But he would have had to squeeze past the fat woman's form or stride across the lean woman's protrusive knees. And fat women and men, and lean, were wedged in the seats on both sides of him. He was imprisoned in his wrath.

As if his own doubts and certainties were not torture enough, he had to hear them voiced in the dialects of others.

The gumstress was saying: "Well, I guess that frien' o' mine got it right when she says those two actors must be in love with each other. I tell you no girrl can look at a feller with those kind of looks without there bein' somethin' doin', you take it from me. No feller like Mr. Eldon is goin' to hold no beauty like Sheila in his arms every evening and not fall in love with her."

Her escort was encouraged by her enthusiasm to rhapsodize over Sheila on his own account. It seemed

to change the atmosphere. He had paid for both seats, but he had not bought free speech. He said—with as little tact as one might expect from a man who would pay court to that woman:

"Well, all I gotter say is, if that guy gets wore out huggin' Sheila I'll take his place and not charge him a cent. Some snap, he has, spendin' his evenin's huggin' and kissin' an A1 beaut like her and gettin' paid for it." He seemed to realize a sudden fall in the temperature. Perhaps he noted that the gum-crunching jaw had paused and the elastic sweetmeat hung idle in the mill. He tried to retreat with a weak:

"But o' course she gets paid for huggin' him, too."

The anxious escort bent forward to look into his companion's face. He caught a glimpse of Bret's eyes and wondered how that maniac came there. He sank back alarmed just as Bret realized that, however unendurable such comment was, he could not resent it while his wife belonged to the public; he could only resolve to take her out of the pillory.

But his Gehenna was not ended yet, for he must hear more from the woman.

"Well, o' course, Mr. Jeggle, if you're goin' to fall for an actress as easy as that, you're not the man I should of thought you was. But that's men all over. An actress gets 'em every time.

"I could of went on the stage myself. Ma always said I got temper'munt to beat the band. But she said if I ever disgraced her so far as to show my face before the footlights I need never come home. I'd find the door closed against me.

"And my gempmum friend at that time says if I done so he'd beat me with a rollin'-pin. The way he come to use such words was he was travelin' for a bakery-supply house—he was kind of rough in his talk—nice, though—and eyes!—umm! Well, him and I quarreled. I found he had two other wives on his route and I refused to see him

again—that's his ring there now. He was a wicked devil, but he did draw the line at actresses. He married often, but he drew the line; and he says no actress should ever be a wife of his.

"And he had it right. No sane man ain't goin' to leave his wife layin' round loose in the arms of any handsome actor, not if he's a real man. If she'll kiss him like that in public—well, I say no more. Not that I blame a poor actress for goin' wrong. I never believe in being merciless to the fallen. It's the fault of the stage. The stage is a nawful immor'l place, Mr. Jeggle. The way I get it is this: if a girl's not ummotional she's got no right on the stage. If she is ummotional she's got no chance to stay good on the stage. Do you see what I mean?"

Mr. Jeggle said he saw what she meant and he forbore to praise Sheila further. He changed the perilous subject hastily and lowered his voice.

Bret, on a gridiron of intolerable humiliation, could hear now the dicta of the elbow-woman.

"I fancy the young men in Chicago are quite safe from that Kemble gull this season. She must be hopelessly infatuated with that actor. And no wonder. If she doesn't keep him close to hah, though, he'll play havoc with every gull in town. He's quite too beautiful—quite!"

In the last act Sheila poured out the confession of her sins to Eldon. This was a bit that Bret had not seen, and it poured vinegar into his wounds to hear his own wife announcing to a thousand people how she had been duped and deceived by a false marriage to a man who had never understood her. That was bad enough, but to have Eldon play the saint and forgive her—Bret gripped the chair arms in a frenzy.

Eldon offered her the shelter of his name and the haven of his love. And she let him hold her in his arms while he poured across her shoulder his divine sentiments. Now and then she would turn her head and gaze up at

him in worship and longing, and at last, with an irresistible passion, she whirled and threw her arms around him and gave him her kisses, and his arms tightened about her in a frenzy of rapture.

That could not be acting. Bret swore that it was real.

They clung together till several humorous characters appeared at doors and windows and she broke away in confusion. There were explanations, untying of knots and tying of others, and the play closed in a comedy finish.

The curtain went down and up and down and up in a storm of applause, and Sheila bowed and bowed, holding Eldon's hand and generously recommending him to the audience. He bowed to her and bowed himself off and left her standing and nodding with quaint little ducks of the head and mock efforts to escape, mock expressions of surprise at finding the curtain up again and the audience still there.

Bret had to wait till the women got into their hats and wraps. They were talking, laughing, and sopping up their tears. They had been well fed on sorrow and joy and they were ready for supper and sleep.

Bret wanted to fight his way through in football manner, but he could hardly move. The crowd ebbed out with the deliberation of a glacier, and he could not escape either the people or their comments. The Chicago papers had not heard of Sheila's marriage to him. He was a nonentity. The sensation of the town was the romance of Sheila Kemble and Floyd Eldon.

When at last Bret was free of the press he dashed round to the stage entrance. The old doorkeeper made no resistance, for the play was over and visitors often came back to pay their compliments to the troupe. Bret was the first to arrive.

In his furious haste he stumbled down the steps to the stage and almost sprawled. He had to wait while a squad of "grips" went by with a huge folded flat representing the whole side of a canvas house.

He stepped forward; a sandbag came down and struck him on the shoulder. He tripped on the cables of the box lights and lost his glasses. While he groped about for them he heard the orchestra, muffled by the curtain, playing the audience out to a boisterous tune. His clutching fingers were almost stepped on by two men carrying away a piece of solid stairway.

Before he found his glasses he was demoniac with rage. He rubbed them on his sleeve, set them in place, and again a departing wall obstructed his view. An actress and an actor walked into him. At last he found the clear stage ahead of him. He made out a group at the center of it. McNish, Batterson, and Prior were in jovial conference, slapping each other's shoulders and chortling with the new wine of success.

He brushed by them and saw Sheila at last. Reben was holding her by one arm; his other hand was on Eldon's shoulder. He was telling them of the big leap in the box-office receipts.

Sheila seemed rapturous with pride and contentment. Bret saw her murmur something to Eldon. He could not hear what it was, but he heard Eldon chuckle delightedly. Then he called:

"Eldon!"

Eldon looked forward just in time to see Bret coming on like a striding giant, just in time to see the big arm swing up in a rigid drive, shoulder and side and all.

The clenched fist caught Eldon under the chin and sent him backward across a heavy table.

CHAPTER XL

THE thud of the fist, the grunt of Bret's effort, the shriek of Sheila, the clatter of Eldon's fall, the hubbub of the startled spectators, were all jumbled.

When Eldon, dazed almost to unconsciousness, gathered himself together for self-defense and counter attack, the stage was revolving about him. Instinctively he put up his guard, clenched his right fist, and shifted clear of the table.

Then his anger flamed through his bewilderment. He realized who had struck him, and he dimly understood why. A blaze of rage against this foreigner, this vandal, shot up in his soul, and he advanced on Winfield with his arm drawn back. But he found Winfield struggling with Batterson and McNish, who had flung themselves on him, grappling his arms. Eldon stopped with his fists poised. He could not strike that unprotected face, though it was gray with hatred of him.

An instant he paused, then unclenched his hand and fell to straightening his collar and rubbing his stinging flesh. Sheila had run between the two men in a panic. All her thought was to protect her husband. Her eyes blazed against Eldon. He saw the look, and it hurt him worse than his other shame. He laughed bitterly into Bret's face.

"We're even now. I struck you when you didn't expect it because you didn't belong on the stage. You don't belong here now. Get off! Get off or—God help you!"

This challenge infuriated Bret, and he made such

violent effort to reach Eldon that Batterson, Prior, McNish, and an intensely interested and hopeful group of stage-hands could hardly smother his struggles. He bent and wrestled like the withed Samson, and his hatred for Eldon could find no word bitter enough but "You—you—you actor!"

Eldon laughed at this taunt and answered with equal contempt, "You thug—you business man!" Then, seeing how Sheila urged Bret away, how dismayed and frantic she was, he cried in Bret's face: "You thought you struck me—but it was your wife you struck in the face!"

Sheila did not thank him for that pity. She silenced him with a glare, then turned again to her husband, put her arms about his arms, and clung to them with little fetters that he could not break for fear of hurting her. She laid her head on his breast and talked to his battling heart:

"Oh, Bret, Bret! honey, my love! Don't, don't! I can't bear it! You'll kill me if you fight any more!"

The fights of men and dogs are almost never carried to a finish. One surrenders or runs or a crowd interferes.

Winfield felt all his strength leave him. His wife's voice softened him; the triumph of his registered blow satisfied him to a surprising degree; the conspicuousness of his position disgusted him. He nodded his head and his captors let him go.

The reaction and the exhaustion of wrath weakened him so that he could hardly stand, and Sheila supported him almost as much as he supported her.

And now Reben began on him. An outsider had invaded the sanctum of his stage, had attacked one of his people—an actor who had made good. Winfield had broken up the happy family of success with an omen of scandal.

Reben denounced him in a livid fury: "Why did you do it? Why? What right have you to come back here

and slug one of my actors? Why? He is a gentleman! Your wife is a lady! Why should you be—what you are? You should apologize, you should!"

"Apologize!" Bret sneered, with all loathing in his grin.

Eldon flared at the look, but controlled himself. "He doesn't owe me any apology. Let him apologize to his wife, if he has any decency in him."

He sat down on the table, but stood up again lest he appear weak. Again Sheila threw him a look of hatred. Then she began to coax Winfield from the scene, whispering to him pleadingly and patting his arms soothingly:

"Come away, honey. Come away, please. They're all staring. Don't fight any more, please—oh, please, for my sake!"

He suffered her to lead him into the wings and through the labyrinth to her dressing-room.

And now the stage was like a church at a funeral after the dead has been taken away. Everybody felt that Sheila was dead to the theater. The look in her eyes, her failure to rebuke her husband for his outrage on the company, her failure to resent his attitude toward herself—all these pointed to a slavish submission. Everybody knew that if Sheila took it into her head to leave the stage there would be no stopping her.

The curtain went up, disclosing the empty house with all the soul gone out of it. In the cavernous balconies and the cave of the orchestra the ushers moved about banging the seats together. They went waist-deep in the rows, vanishing as they stooped to pick up programs and rubbish. They were exchanging light persiflage with the charwomen who were spreading shrouds over the long windrows. The ushers and the scrub-ladies knew nothing of what had taken place after the curtain fell. They knew strangely little about theatrical affairs.

They were hardly interested in the groups lingering

on the stage in quiet, after-the-funeral conversation. But the situation was vitally interesting to the actors and the staff. Without Sheila the play would be starless. How could it go on? The company would be disbanded, the few weeks of salary would not have paid for the long rehearsals or the costumes. The people would be taken back to New York and dumped on the market again, and at a time when most of the opportunities were gone.

It meant a relapse to poverty for some of them, a postponement of ambitions and of loves, a further deferment of old bills; it meant children taken out of good schools, parents cut off from their allowances; it meant all that the sudden closing of any other factory means.

The disaster was so unexpected and so outrageous that some of them found it incredible. They could not believe that Sheila would not come back and patch up a peace with Reben and Eldon and let the success continue. Successes were so rare and so hard to make that it was unbelievable that this tremendous gold-mine should be closed down because of a little quarrel, a little jealousy, a little rough temper and hot language.

Eldon alone did not believe that Sheila would return. He had loved her and lost her. He had known her great ambitions, how lofty and beautiful they had been. He had dreamed of climbing the heights at her side; then he had learned of her marriage and had seen how completely her art had ceased to be the big dream of her soul, how completely it had been shifted to a place secondary to love.

No, Sheila would not make peace. Sheila was dead to this play, and this play dead without her, and without this play Sheila would die. Of this he felt solemnly assured.

Therefore when the others expressed their sympathy for the attack he had endured, or made jokes about it, he did not boast of what he might have done, or apologize for what he had left undone, or try to laugh it off or lie it off.

He could think only solemnly of the devastation in an artist's career and the deep damnation of her taking off.

Batterson said, "Say, that was a nasty one he handed you."

Eldon confessed: "Yes, it nearly knocked my head off; but it was coming to me."

"Why didn't you hand him one back?"

"How could I hit him when you held his hands? How could I hit him when his wife was clinging to him? And what's a blow? I've had worse ones than that in knock-down and drag-out fights. I'll get a lot more later, no doubt. But I couldn't hit Winfield. He doesn't understand. Sheila has trouble enough ahead of her with him. Poor Sheila! She's the one that will pay. The rest of us will get other jobs. But Sheila is done for."

By now the scenery was all folded and stacked against the walls. The drops were lost in the flies. The furniture and properties were withdrawn. The bare walls of the naked stage were visible.

The electrician was at the switchboard, throwing off the house lights in order. They went out like great eyes closing. The theater grew darker and more forlorn. The stage itself yielded to the night. The footlights and borders blinked and were gone. There was no light save a little glow upon a standard set in the center of the apron.

Eldon sighed and went to his dressing-room.

CHAPTER XLI

MEANWHILE Sheila was immured with her husband. She sent Pennock away and locked the door, pressed Bret into a chair, and knelt against his knee and stretched her arms up.

"What is it, honey? What's happened? I didn't know you were within a thousand miles of here."

He was still ugly enough to growl, "Evidently not!"

She seemed to understand and recoiled from him, sank back on her heels as if his fist had struck her down. "What do you mean?" she whispered. "That I—I—You can't mean you distrust me?"

"That dog loves you and you—"

"Don't say it!" She rose to her knees again and put up her hands. "I could never forgive you if you said that now—and our honeymoon just begun."

"Honeymoon!" he laughed. "Look at this." He held up his right hand. Grease-paint from Eldon's jaw was on his knuckles. He put his finger on her cheek and it was covered with the same unction. Then he rubbed the odious ointment from his hands. She blushed under her rouge.

"I know it's been a pitiful honeymoon. But I couldn't help it, Bret. I did what I could. It has been harder for me than for you, and I'm just worn out. There's no joy in the world for me. The success is nothing."

"He loves you, I tell you, and you let him make love to you."

"Of course, honey; it's in the play; it's in the play!"

"Not love like that. Why, everybody in the audience

was saying it was real. All the people round me were saying you two were in love with each other."

"That's what we were working for, isn't it?"

"Oh, not the characters, but you two; you and Eldon. Couldn't I see how he looked at you, how you looked at him, how you—you crushed him in your arms?"

"How else could we show that the characters were madly in love with each other, dear?"

"But you didn't have to play it so earnestly."

"It wouldn't be honest not to do our best, would it? Can't you understand?"

"I can understand that my wife was in the arms of a man that loves her, and that even if you don't love him, you pretended to, and he took advantage of it to—to—to kiss you!"

"Why, he didn't kiss me, honey."

"I saw him."

"No, you didn't. We just pretended to kiss each other. Not that a stage kiss makes any difference with rouge pressing on grease-paint—but, anyway, he didn't."

"You'll be telling me he didn't make love to you next."

"Of course he didn't, honey. We'd be fined for it if Reben or Batterson had noticed it; but the fact is we were trying to break each other up. Actors are always doing that when they're sure of a success. We've been under a heavy strain, you know, and now we let down a little."

Bret could hardly believe what he wanted so to believe—that while the audience was sobbing the actors were juggling with emotions, the mere properties of their trade. He asked, grimly, "If he wasn't making love to you, what was he saying?"

"It was nothing very clever. He's not witty, Eldon; he's rather heavy when he tries to write his own stuff. He accused me of letting the scene lag, and he was whispering to me that I was 'asleep at the switch, and the switch

was falling off,' and I answered him back that Dulcie Ormerod would please him better."

"Dulcie Ormerod? Who's Dulcie Ormerod?"

"Oh, she's a little tike of an actress that took my place in the 'Friend in Need' company a long while ago. And she's come on here to be my understudy. Eldon hates her because she makes love to him all the time."

Bret's gaze pierced her eyes, trying to find a lie behind their defense. "And you dare to tell me that you and Eldon were joking?"

"Of course we were, honey. If I'd been in love with him I wouldn't choose the theater to display it in, with a packed house watching, would I? If we'd been carried away with our own emotion we'd have played the scene badly.

"Another thing happened. Batterson noticed that something was wrong with our work, and he stood in the wings close to me and began to whip us up. He was snarling at us: 'Get to work, you two. Put some ginger in it.' And he swore at us. That made us work harder."

Bret was dumfounded. "You mean to tell me that you played a love-scene better because the stage-manager was swearing at you?"

Sheila frowned at his ignorance. "Of course, you dear old stupid. Acting is like horse-racing. Sometimes we need the spur and the whip; sometimes we need a kind word or a pat on the head. Acting is a business, honey. Can't you understand? We played it well because it's a business and we know our business. If you can't understand the first thing about my profession I might as well give it up."

"That's one thing we agree on, thank God."

"Oh, I'd be glad to quit any time. I'm worn out. I don't like this play. It hasn't a new idea in it. I'm tired of it already and I dread the thought of going on with it for a year—two years, maybe. I wish I could quit to-night."

"You're going to."

She was startled by the quiet conviction of his tone. Again she sighed: "If I only could!"

"I mean it, Sheila," he declared. "This is your last night on the stage or your last night as my wife."

She studied him narrowly. He really meant it! He went on:

"Joking or no joking, you were in another man's arms and you had no idea when you were coming home. We have no home. I have no wife. It can't go on. You come back with me to-morrow or I go back alone for good and all."

"But Reben—" she interposed, helpless between the millstones of her two destinies as woman and artist.

"I'll settle with Reben."

She hardly pondered the decision. Suddenly it was made for her. She looked at her husband and felt that she belonged to him first, last, and forever. She was at the period when all her inheritances and all nature commanded her to be woman, to be wife to her man. It was good to have him decide for her.

She dropped to the floor again and breathed a little final, comfortable, "All right."

Bret bent over and caught her up into his arms with a strength that assured her protection against all other claimants of her, and he kissed her with a contented certainty that he had never known before. Then he set her on her feet and said with a noble authority:

"Hurry and get out of those things and into your own."

She laughed at his magistral tone, and her last act of independence was to put him out of the actress's room and call Pennock to her aid. Bret stood guard in the corridor. If he had had any qualms of conscience they would have been eased by the sound of Sheila's cheerful voice as she made old Pennock bestir herself.

At length Sheila emerged with no trace of the actress about her, just a neat little, tight little armful of wife.

As they were about to turn out at the stage door they saw Reben lingering in the wings. He beckoned to Sheila and called her by name. She moved toward him, not because he was her boss, but because he did not know that he was not. She rejoiced to feel that she had changed masters. Her husband, already the protector and champion, motioned her back and went to Reben in her stead.

"I wanted Miss Kemble," Reben said, very coldly.

To which Bret retorted, calmly, "Mrs. Winfield has decided to resign from your company."

Reben had fought himself to a state of self-control. He had resolved to leave Sheila and Bret to settle their own feud. He would observe a strict neutrality. His business was to keep the company together and at work. The word "resign" alarmed him anew.

"Resign!" he gasped. "When?"

"To-night."

"Nonsense! She plays to-morrow."

"She cannot play to-morrow."

"She is ill? I don't wonder, after such scenes. Her understudy might get through to-morrow night, but after that she must appear."

"She cannot appear again."

"My dear fellow, I have a contract."

"I am breaking the contract."

"Your name is not on the contract."

"It is on a contract of marriage."

"So you told me. She plays, just the same."

"She does not play."

"I will make her play."

"How?"

"I— She— You— Sheila, you can't put such a trick on me."

Sheila crept forward to interpose again: "I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Reben. But my husband—"

"Have I treated you badly? Have I neglected anything? Have I done you any injury?"

"No, no. I have no fault to find with you, Mr. Reben. But my husband—"

"Before you married him—before you met him, you promised me—"

"I know. I'm terribly sorry, but my duty to my husband is my highest duty. Please forgive me, but I can't play any more."

"You shall play. I have invested a fortune in your future. I have made you a success. You can't desert me and the company now. You can't! You sha'n't, by—"

Sheila shook her head. She was done with the stage. Reben was throttled with his own anger. He turned again on Winfield and shook a jeweled fist under his nose:

"This is your infernal meddling. You get out of here and never come near again."

Winfield pressed Reben's fist down with a quiet strength. "We're not going to."

"You, I mean; not Sheila. Sheila belongs to me. She is my star. I made her. I need her. She means a fortune to me."

"How much of a fortune does she mean to you?"

"I will clear a hundred thousand dollars from this piece at least; a hundred thousand dollars! You think I will let you rob me of that?"

"I'm not going to. I will pay you that much to cancel her contract."

Reben gasped in his face. "You—you will pay me a—hun—dred—thou—sand—dol—lars?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I haven't that much cash in the bank."

"Ha, ha! I guess not!"

"But I will pay it to you long before Sheila could earn it for you."

"I will believe that when I see it."

"I haven't my check-book with me. I will send you a check for ten thousand on account to-morrow morning."

Reben laughed wildly at him. Bret took out his card-case. There was a small gold pencil on his key-chain. He wrote a few words and handed the card to Reben:

I O U $100,000

MR. BRET WINFIELD

Bret Winfield

Reben tossed his mane in scorn.

Bret answered: "It is a debt of honor. I'm able to pay it and I will."

Reben stared up into the man's cold eyes, looked down at the card, tightened his mouth, put the card into his pocketbook, and snarled:

"Honor! We'll see. Now get out—both of you!"

Winfield accepted the dismissal with a smile of pride, and, turning, took Sheila's arm and led her away.

"Oh, Bret! Bret!" she moaned.

"Don't you worry, honey. You're worth it," he laughed.

"I wonder!" she sighed.

The next morning after breakfast Bret sat down to write the ten-thousand-dollar check. "It makes an awful hole in my back account," he said, "but it heals a bigger one in my heart."

Just then a note was brought to the door. When he opened it the "I O U" torn into small bits fell into his hands from a sheet of letter-paper containing these words:

MY DEAR MR. WINFIELD,—Please find inclosed a little wedding-present for your charming bride. One of the unavoidable hazards of the manager's life is the fatal curiosity of actresses concerning the experiment of marriage. Please tell Miss Kemble —I should say Mrs. Winfield—that no fear of inconveniencing

me must disturb her honeymoon. Miss Dulcie Ormerod will step into her vacant shoes and fill them nicely. I cannot return her contract, as it is in my safe in New York. I will leave it there until she feels that her vacation is over, when I shall be glad to renew it. The clever little lady insisted on cutting out the two weeks' clause in her contract with me—I wonder if she left it in yours.

With all felicitation, I am, dear Mr. and Mrs. Winfield,

Faithfully yours,

HENRY REBEN.

BRET WINFIELD, Esq.

Sheila read the ironic words across Bret's arm. She clung to it as to a spar of rescue and laughed. "I'll never go back."

And this time it was Bret who sighed, "I wonder."

CHAPTER XLII

THE impromptu epilogue to the play and the abandonment of the theater by the young star had occurred too late to reach the next morning's papers.

The evening sheets were sure to make a spread. The actors were bound to gossip, and the stage-hands. Somebody would tell some reporter and gain a little credit or a little excitement. Therefore almost everybody would join in the race for publication.

Reben understood this, and he held a council of war with Starr Coleman as to the best form of presentation. He had a natural and not unjustified desire to have the story do the least possible harm to his play. He collaborated with his press agent for hours over the campaign, and they decided upon a formal telegram to be given to the Associated Press and the other bureaus. They would flash it to all the crannies of the continent. It was too bad that such easy publicity should be wasted on an expiring instead of a rising star.

For the Chicago papers Reben decided upon an interview which he would give with seeming reluctance at the solicitation of Coleman on behalf of the reporters.

The loss of Sheila was a serious blow. The problem was whether or not "Hamlet" could succeed with Hamlet omitted; or, rather, if "As You Like It" would prosper without Rosalind.

Reben had been tempted to close the theater at once; then get Winfield's money out of him if he had to levy on his father's business, which, the manager had learned, was big and solvent.

But his egotism revolted at such a procedure, and in a fine burst of pride he had written the letter to Bret and, tearing the "I O U" to shreds, sealed it in. At the same time he resolved not to give up the ship. It was never easy to tell who made the success of a play. He had known road companies to take in more money without a famous star than with one.

He rounded up Batterson, got him out of bed, and sent for Dulcie Ormerod to meet him in the deserted hotel parlor and begin rehearsals at once. She could make up her sleep later in the day or next week. Then he went to his own bed.

Sometimes luck conspires with the brave. The first stage-hand who met the first early morning reporter and sold him the story for a drink had the usual hazy idea one brings away from a fist-battle. According to him Winfield had come back on the stage drunk and started a row by striking at Mr. Eldon.

Eldon knocked Winfield backward into the arms of Batterson and McNish, and would have finished him off if Sheila had not sheltered him. Thereupon Eldon ordered Winfield out of the theater, and he retreated under the protection of his wife, for it seemed that the poor girl had been deluded into marrying the hound.

The reporter was overjoyed at this glorious find. He hunted up Sheila and Winfield first. Sheila answered the telephone, and at Bret's advice refused to see or be seen. She gave the reporter the message that her husband had absolutely nothing to say.

It is a safe statement at times, but just now it confirmed the reporter in a beautiful theory that Eldon had beaten Winfield up so badly that he was in no condition to be seen.

The reporter found Batterson next and told him his suspicions. Batterson, surly with wrecked slumber, was pleased to confirm the theory and make a few additions. He owed Winfield no courtesies.

When Starr Coleman and Reben were found they needed no prompting to set that snowball rolling and to play up Eldon's heroism. Coleman added the excellent thought that Winfield's motive was one of professional jealousy because Eldon had run away with the play and the star's laurels were threatened. For that reason she had basely deserted the ship; but the ship would go on. Mr. Reben, in fact, had felt that Miss Kemble was an unfortunate selection for the play and had already decided to substitute his wonderful discovery, the brilliant, beautiful Dulcie Ormerod—photographs herewith.

That was the story that Bret and Sheila read when it occurred to them to send down for an evening paper. Bret was desperate with rage—rage at Eldon, at Reben, at the entire press, and the whole world. But he remembered that his father, who had been a politician, had used as his motto: "Don't fight to-day's paper till next week. You can't whip a cyclone. Take to the cellar and it will soon blow over."

Sheila was frantic with remorses of every variety. She blamed Eldon for it all. She did not absolve him even when a little note arrived from him:

DEAR MRS. WINFIELD,—After the exciting events of last night I overslept this morning. I have but this minute seen the outrageous stories in the newspapers. I beg you to believe that I had no part in them and that I shall do what I can to deny the ridiculous rôle they put upon me.

Yours faithfully,
FLOYD ELDON.

Eldon's denials were as welcome as denials of picturesque newspaper stories always are. They were suppressed or set in small type, with statements that Mr. Eldon very charmingly and chivalrously and with his characteristic modesty attempted to minimize his share in a most unpleasant matter.

Bret was so annoyed by a chance encounter with a

group of cross-examining reporters, and found himself so hampered by his inability to explain his own anger at Eldon and the theater without implying gross suspicion of his wife's behavior, that he broke away, returned to the policy of silence that he ought not to have left, and, gathering Sheila up, fled with her to his own home.

The play profited by the advertisement, and Dulcie Ormerod slid into the established rôle like a hand going into a glove several sizes too large. Eldon was doubly a hero now, and Reben went back to New York with triumph perched on his cigar.

CHAPTER XLIII

A HONEYMOON is like a blue lagoon divinely beautiful, with a mimicry of all heaven in its deeps; blinding sweet in the sun, and almost intolerably comfortable in the moon.

But by and by the atoll that circles it like a wedding-ring proves to be a bit narrow and interferes with the view of the big sea pounding at its outer edges. The calm becomes monotonous, and at the least puff of wind the boat is on the reefs. They are coral reefs, but they cut like knives and hurt the worse for being jewelry.

To Bret and Sheila the newspaper storm over her departure from the theater, her elopement from success, was like the surf on the shut-out sea.

The Winfield influence had suppressed most of the newspaper comment in the home papers, but the people of Blithevale read the metropolitan journals, and Sheila's name flared through those for many days.

When the news element had been exhausted there were crumbs enough left for several symposiums on the subject of "Stage Marriages," "Actresses as Wives," "Actresses as Mothers," "The Home *vs.* the Theater," and all the twists an ingenious press can give to a whimsy of public interest.

Bret and Sheila suffered woefully from the appalling pandemonium their secret wedding had raised, and Winfield began to be convinced that the policy of the mailed fist, the blow and the word, had not brought him dignity. But it had brought him his wife, and she was at home; and when they could not escape the articles on "Why

Actresses Go Back to the Stage," she laughed at the prophecies that she would return, as so many others had done.

"They haven't all gone back," she smiled. "And I am one of those who never will, for I've found peace and bliss and contentment. I've found my home."

They were relieved of all that had been unusual in their marriage, and they shared and inspired the usual raptures, which were no less poignant for being immemorially usual. This year's June was the most beautiful June that ever was, while it was the newest June.

Their honeymoon was usual in being sublime. It was also usual in running into frequent shoals and reefs.

The first reef was Bret's mother. Bret had always been amazed at the professional jealousy of actors and their contests for the largest type and the center of the stage. Suddenly he was himself the center of the stage and his attention was the large type. He was dismayed to behold with what immediate instinct his mother and his wife proceeded to take mutual umbrage at each other's interest in him, and to take astonishing pain from his efforts to divide his heart into equal portions.

Sheila recognized that poor Mrs. Winfield had a right to her son's support in a time of such grief, but she felt that she herself had a right to some sort of honeymoon. And being a stranger in the town and all, she had especial claim to consideration.

Sheila told Bret one day: "Of course, honey, your mother is a perfect dear and I don't wonder you love her, but she'd like to poison me— Now wait, dearie. Of course I don't mean just that, but—well, she's like an understudy. An understudy doesn't exactly want the star to break her neck or anything, but if a train ran over her she'd bear up bravely."

Another reef was the factory. Of course Sheila expected her husband to pay the proper attention to his business and she wanted him to be ambitious, but she had

not anticipated how little time was left in a day after the necessary office hours, meal hours, and sleep hours were deducted.

She wrote her mother:

Bret is an ideal husband and I'm ideally happy, of course, but women off the stage are terrible loafers. They just sit in the window and watch the procession go by.

When I chucked Reben I said, "Thank Heaven, I don't have to go on playing that same old part for two or three years night after night, matinée after matinée." But that's nothing to the record of the household drama. This is the scene plot of my daily performance:

SCENE: Home of the Winfields. TIME: Yesterday, to-day, and forever.

ACT I. SCENE: Dining-room. TIME: 8 A.M. Husband and wife at breakfast. Soliloquy by wife while hubby reads paper and eats eggs and says, "Yes, honey," at intervals. Exit husband. CURTAIN.

Five hours elapse.

ACT II. SCENE: Same as ACT I. Luncheon on table. Husband enters hurriedly, apologizes for coming home late and dashing away early. Tells of trouble at factory. Exit hastily. CURTAIN.

Five hours elapse.

ACT III. SCENE: Same as ACT II. Dinner on table. Husband discusses trouble at factory. Wife tells of troubles with servants. Neither understands the other. CURTAIN.

Two hours elapse.

ACT IV. SCENE: Living-room. Husband reads evening papers; wife reads stupid magazines. Business of making love. Return to reading-matter. Husband falls asleep in chair. CURTAIN.

That's the scenario, and the play has settled down for an indefinite run at this house.

Roger and Polly read the letter and shook their heads over it. Roger sighed.

"How long do you think it's really booked for, Polly?"

"Knowing Sheila—" Polly began, then shook her head. "Well, really I don't know. There are so many Sheilas, and I haven't met the last three or four of them."

For many months Sheila was royally entertained by what she called "the merry villagers." She was the audience and they the spectacle. She took a childish delight in mimicking odd types, to Bret's amusement and his mother's distress. She took a daughter-in-law's delight in shocking her mother-in-law by pretending to be shocked at the Blithevale vices.

Hitherto Sheila had gone to church regularly next Sunday, but seldom this. In Blithevale Mrs. Winfield compelled her to attend constantly. Sheila took revenge by quoting all the preacher said about the wickedness of his parishioners.

When she heard of a divorce or a family wreck she would exclaim, "Why, I thought that only actors and actresses were tied loose!"

When she heard of one of those hideous scandals that all communities endure now and then as a sort of measles she would make a face of horror: "Why, I've always read that village life was ninety-nine and forty-four one-hundredths pure."

When Bret would fume at the petty practices of business rivals, the necessity for crushing down competition and infringement, the importance of keeping the name at the top of the list, Sheila would smile, "And do manufacturers have professional jealousy, too?"

She soon realized, however, that her comedy was not getting across the footlights as she meant it.

Seen through the eyes of one who had been used to hard work, far travel, and high salary, the business of being a wife as the average woman conducted it was a farce to Sheila.

That the average wife was truly a helpmeet appeared to her merely a graceful gallantry of the husbands. As a matter of fact, as far as she could see, the only help most of the men got from their wives was the help of the spur and the lash. The women's extravagances and discontent compelled the husbands to double energy and increased achievement.

Thus, while the village was watching with impatient suspicion the behavior of this curious actress-creature who had settled there, the actress-creature was learning the uglier truths about that most persistently flattered of institutions, the American village.

But after the failure of her first satires Sheila resolved to stop being "catty," and to dwell upon the sweeter and more wholesome elements of life in Blithevale. She ceased to defend the theater by aspersing the town.

She said never a word, however, of any longing for a return to the stage. Now and then an exclamation of interest over a bit of theatrical news escaped her when she read the New York paper that had been coming to the Winfield home for years. It arrived after Bret left for the office, and he usually glanced at it during his luncheon. One noon Bret's eye was caught by head-lines on an inner page devoted largely to dramatic news. The "triumph" of "The Woman Pays" was announced; it had been produced in New York the night before. In spite of the handicap of its Chicago success it had conquered Broadway. As sometimes happens, it found the Manhattanites even more enthusiastic than the Westerners.

Bret noted with a kind of resentment that Sheila was not mentioned as the creator of the leading rôle. He hated to see that Dulcie Ormerod was taken seriously by the big critics. He winced to read that Floyd Eldon was a great find, a future star of the first magnitude.

Winfield had once been wretched for fear that his kidnapping of Sheila had ruined the chances of the play. Yet it was not entirely comfortable to see that the play prospered so hugely without her. He had not been entirely glad that Reben had returned his "I O U"; and he was not entirely glad that Reben stood to make a greater profit than he had estimated at first in spite of Sheila. It was a peculiarly galling humiliation.

Bret would have concealed the paper from Sheila, but he knew that she had read it before he came home to

luncheon. He had wondered what made her so distraught. Now that he knew, he said nothing, but he could see the torment in the back of her smiling eyes, the labored effort to be casual and inconsequential. That Mona Lisa enigma haunted him at his office, and he resolved to take her for a spin in the car. She would be having a hard day, for ambitious fevers have their crises and relapses, too. Bret wanted to help his wife over this bitter hour.

When he came in unexpectedly he found her lying asleep on the big divan in the living-room. The crumpled newspaper lay on the floor at her side. She had been reading it again. Her lashes were wet with recent tears, yet she was smiling in her sleep. As he bent to kiss her her lips moved. He paused, an eavesdropper on her very dreams. And he made out the muffled, disjointed words:

"What can I say but, thank you—on behalf of the company—your applause—I thank you."

She was taking a curtain call!

Bret tiptoed away, wounded by her and for her. He struggled for self-control a moment, telling himself that he was a fool to blame her for her dreams. He knocked loudly on the door and called to her. She woke with a start, stared, realized where she was and who he was, and smiled upon him lovingly. She explained that she had been asleep and "dreaming foolish dreams."

But when he asked what they were she shrugged her shoulders and laughed, "I forget."

Afterward Bret read that "The Woman Pays" had settled down for a long run on Broadway. Sheila settled down also and attended to her knitting. And knitting became a more and more important office. She was more and more content to sit in an easy-chair and wait.

Bret paused one day to pick up some of the curious doll-clothes.

'I knat 'em myself," said Sheila, with boundless pride.

Bret, the business man, pondered the manufacturing cost.

"You could buy the whole lot for ten dollars," he said. "And they've taken you a month to finish them. You're not charging as much for your time as you did."

"No," she said, "I could buy 'em for less, and it would be still less trouble to adopt a child to wear 'em; but it wouldn't be quite the same, would it?"

He agreed that it would not.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE most thrilling first night of Sheila's life was her début as a mother. The doctor and the stork had a nip-and-tuck race. The young gentleman weighed more than ten pounds.

According to all the formulas of tradition, this epochal event should have made a different woman of Sheila. The child should have filled her life. According to actual history, Sheila was still Sheila, and her son, while he brought great joys and great anxieties, rather added new ambitions than satisfied the old.

Bret senior did not change his business interests or give up his office hours because of the child. Indeed, he was spurred on to greater effort that he might leave his heir a larger fortune.

The trained nurse, who received twenty-five dollars a week, and the regular nurse, who received twenty-five dollars a month, knew infinitely more about babies than Sheila.

The elder Mrs. Winfield, with the best intention and the worst tact, thought to make Sheila happy by telling her how happy she ought to be. This is an ancient practice that has never been discarded, though it has never yet succeeded.

The elder Mrs. Winfield said, "It's a splendid thing for baby that you've given up the stage."

Sheila felt an implied attack on her own family, and she bristled gently: "It's fine for me, but I don't think the baby would notice the difference if I acted every night. My mother didn't leave the stage, and her mother

and my father's mother were hard-working actresses. And their children certainly prospered. Besides, if I were out of the way, the baby would have the advantage of its grandmother uninterrupted."

The new grandmother accepted the last statement as an obvious truth and attacked the first. "You're still thinking of going back, then?"

"Not at all," said Sheila. "I'll never act again. I was just saying that it wouldn't harm the baby if I did. And," she added, meekly, "it might be the making of him to have me out of the way."

She said this with honest deprecation. She was troubled to find that she had not become one of those mere mothers that are so universal in books. She was horrified to discover that at times the baby lost its novelty, that its tantrums tried her nerves. She did not know enough to know that this was true of all mothers. She felt ashamed and afraid of herself. She did not return to her normal glow of health so soon as she should have done. She kept thin and wan. Cheerfulness was not in her, save when she played it like a rôle.

At length the doctor recommended a change of scene. Since it was not quiet that she needed, he suggested diversion, a trip to the city. The three Winfields made the journey—father, mother, and baby, not to mention the nurse.

The quick pulse and exultant life of New York reacted upon Sheila. She found the theaters a swift tonic, and, since "The Woman Pays" was now on the road after a long season on Broadway, there was no danger of choosing the wrong theater. She and Bret reveled in the plays with the ingenuous gaiety of farmers in town.

At this time, also, a monster "all-star" benefit was being extensively advertised. A great fire had destroyed a large part of one of our highly inflammable American cities, leaving thousands of people in such distress that

public charity was invoked. The actors, as usual the most prompt of all classes to respond to any call upon their generosity, organized a huge performance to be given at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Players, managers, scene-painters, and scene-shifters were emulous in the service. Stars offered to scintillate in insignificant rôles. A program lasting from one o'clock to six was speedily concocted. The Opera House was not large enough for the demand. Boxes were sold by eminent auctioneers at astonishing premiums.

Bret took it into his head to assist. He paid two hundred dollars for a box.

Sheila left the baby with the nurse, put on a brand-new Paris frock, and gulped an early luncheon that she might not miss a line. Bret saw with mingled relief and dismay that she was as eager as a child going to her first party.

They read with awe the name-plate on the door of the box they had rented; it was that of one of the war lords of American finance.

The Opera House was seething with people. Bret and Sheila wedged their way through a dense skirmish-line of prominent actresses selling programs printed free with illustrations designed free. Bret had bought five for ten dollars before Sheila restrained him.

The bill was a reckless hash; everything was in it from a morsel of tragedy to a bit of juggling and repartee. The vast planes of the auditorium were crowded with people. The dean of the dramatists announced from the stage that the receipts were over fifteen thousand dollars and that a program autographed by every participant would be auctioned later.

Bret, in a mood of extravagance, determined to buy it for Sheila. It would show that he was not ashamed of her past or afraid of her future. During an intermission they promenaded the corridors thronged with notables. Sheila bowed her head almost off and was

greeted with an effusiveness usually reserved for long-lost children.

At length Sheila heard her name called, felt a hand plucking at her elbow. She turned and faced Dulcie Ormerod, who gushed like a faucet:

"How are you, Sheila dear? I haven't seen you for ages. How well you look! Isn't this wonderful? Our play is in Trenton this week, so Mr. Eldon and I just ran over to take in this show. And is this your husband? Mayn't I meet him?"

Sheila made the presentation helplessly, and Dulcie gushed on:

"I've been dying to see you. You remember Mr. Eldon, don't you? Where is that man? Oh, Floydie dear, here's an old friend of yours."

To Sheila's horror and Bret's she turned and seized the elbow of a man whose back was turned and whose existence they had not noted in the thick crowd. Dulcie dragged Eldon about and swung him into his place at her side. He confronted Sheila and Bret as by miracle.

CHAPTER XLV

DULCIE had plotted it all for her own personal entertainment. Like a mad King of Bavaria she commanded the actors before her. She had caught sight of Sheila, and she knew who Bret was from the descriptions of him. She had a grudge against Sheila on general principles and another against Eldon for not going mad over her.

Eldon had received no answer to the note he sent Sheila denying his part in the newspaper notoriety. This had rankled in his heart. Bret still believed that the note was a lie and an effort to keep a hook on Sheila. He loved Eldon less than ever.

There was a longing for battle in both the big hearts, and each would have been glad to beat the other down before the whole crowd; yet, because of the crowd, neither could strike.

Sheila guessed at once that Dulcie had planned it; the cat was overacting her rôle of surprise and regret, as her little heart thrilled to see the two men braced in scarlet confusion and Sheila fluttering between them.

Bret endured a year of compressed agony. The foolishness of resuming the fight, the foolishness of not resuming it, the inextricable tangle of contradictory duties and impulses, shattered him. Eldon was undergoing the same return to chaos.

Yet the crowd shoving past observed nothing and did not pause. Bret felt Sheila's hand clasp his arm both to protect and to be protected, and she urged him on. Then he managed to bow with formality to Eldon and

to Dulcie. And so the great rencounter ended. Dulcie alone was made happy.

Sheila could not let her get away with that baby stare. She smiled with pretended amusement and said, "Thank you ever so much, Miss Ormerod."

"Thank me for what?" gasped Dulcie. But Sheila just twinkled her eyes and smiled as she walked on.

Her muscles were tired for half an hour with the effort that smile cost them.

She led Bret to the box, and he was shivering with the unsatisfied emotions of a fighter for the battle missed. Sheila sank into a chair exhausted. She looked about anxiously. The one thing needed to complete the situation was for Eldon to walk into the next box and spend the rest of the afternoon. They were spared this coincidence.

Bret was in no mood to remain, but she kept him there. There would be some distraction at least in the spectacle. If they went back to their hotel they would have only their bitterness to chew upon.

The auction of the autographed program began. There was excited bidding from all parts of the house. But Bret kept silent. The program brought five hundred dollars. Bret sneered at the price of the trash.

A musical number came next. The orchestra struck up a tune that would have set gravestones to jigging. A platoon of young men and women in fantastic bravery was flung across the stage, singing and caracoling. A famous buffoon waddled to the footlights and beamed like a new red moon with its chin on the horizon. He was a master of the noble art of tomfoolery and the high-school of horse-play. He probed into the childhood core of every heart, and no grief could resist him.

Sheila forgot to be dismal and tried to look solemn for Bret's sake till she saw that he was overpowered, too. He began to grin, to sniff, to snort, to shake, to roll, to guffaw. He laughed till tears poured down his cheeks.

Sheila laughed in a dual joy. Everything solemn, ugly, hateful, dignified, had become foolish and childish; and foolishness had become the one great wisdom of the world.

The jester always wins in a contest with the doldrums because philosophy and honor present riddles that cannot be solved. The mystery of fun is just as insoluble, but you laugh while you wait.

Sheila watched the thousands of people rocking and roaring in a surf of delight, and she watched her husband's soul washed clean as a child's heart. It was a noble profession, this clownery; comedy was a priesthood.

Suddenly she saw Bret's eyes, roving the hilarious multitude, pause and harden. She followed the line of his gaze across the space and saw Eldon in a box. He was laughing like a huge boy, putting back his head and baying the moon with yelps of delight.

She watched Bret anxiously and saw a kind of forgiveness softening his glare. The contagion of laughter reinfected him and he laughed harder than ever. If Eldon and he had met now they would have leaned on each other to laugh. Music and buffoonery and grief are the universal languages that everybody understands.

The excerpt from the comic opera was succeeded by a little play, and now the audience, shaken from its trenches by the artillery of laughter, was helpless before the pathos. The handkerchiefs fluttered like little white flags everywhere. Sheila saw through her tears that Bret was swallowing hard; a tear rolled out on his cheek, and he was ashamed to brush it off. It splashed on his finger and startled him. He looked at Sheila, and she smiled at him with ineffable tenderness. He reached out and took her hand.

In that mood a swift understanding could have been reached with Eldon. Sheila might almost have forgiven Dulcie. But they did not meet. As they left the Opera House, pleasantly fatigued with the exercise of every emotion, she felt immensely contented.

But the inevitable reaction followed. In this wonderful work of the stage, why was she idle? Why was she skulking at a distance when her training, her gifts, her ambitions, called her to do her share—to make people glad and sad and wise in sympathy? Why? Why? Why?

Two years later there was another baby—a daughter, its mother's exquisite miniature. There was some bad luck for Sheila on this occasion, and the physician warned her against further child-bearing for several years. She was not up and about so soon as before, and a vague haze of melancholy settled about her. She took less interest in life.

Her laughter was not half so frequent or so clear; her mischief of satire was gone. She smiled on Bret more tenderly than ever, but it was tenderness rather than amusement. She had nerve-storms and idled about incessantly, and sometimes, with no apparent reason or warning, she would sigh frantically, leap to her feet, and pace the floor or the porch or the lawn aimlessly. When Bret anxiously asked her what was the matter she would gaze at him with sorrowful eyes and that doleful effort at a smile and say:

"Nothing, honey; nothing at all."

"But you're not happy?"

"Yes, I am, dear. Why shouldn't I be? I have everything: my lover for my husband, my children, the home —everything."

"Everything," he would groan, "except—"

Then she would put her hands over his lips.

CHAPTER XLVI

EUGENE VICKERY'S sister Dorothy lived in Blithevale. Having lost her first choice, Bret Winfield, to the scintillating Sheila, she had sensibly accepted the devotion of his rival, Jim Greeley, who was now a junior partner in the big chemical works where his father manufactured drug staples.

Dorothy had never forgotten the child Sheila, and the two women resumed their acquaintance, their souls little changed, for all their bodily evolution. They were still two little girls playing with dolls. They were still utterly incomprehensible to each other, and the friendlier for that fact. Dorothy found Sheila a trifle insane, but immensely interesting, and Sheila found Dorothy stodgily Philistine, but thoroughly reliable, as normal as a yardstick.

Sheila gave to her two children all the adoration of a Madonna. They were fascinating toys to her; though at times she tired of them. She entertained them with all her talents, wasting on the infantile private audience graces and gifts that the public would have paid thousands of dollars to see.

But the children tired of their expensive toy, too, and preferred a rag doll or a little tin automobile that banged into chair legs and turned over at the edge of a rug.

Sheila had nursed her babies with an ecstatic pride. That was more than many of the village women did. She had been amazed to learn how many bottle-fed infants there were in town. Dorothy herself strongly recommended one or two foods prepared in other factories than the mother's veins.

Dorothy was not the mother one meets in romance, but very much like the mothers next door and across the street—the ones the doctors know. Her children drove her into storms of impatience and outbursts of temper. Now and then she had to get away from them for half a day or for many days. If she could not escape on a shopping prowl to some other city she would send them off with the nurse under instructions to stay as long as the light held out. She welcomed their visits to relatives, she encouraged them to play in other people's yards. Other mothers with headaches urged their children to play in one another's yards. Nobody knew very well where they played or at what.

Dorothy was a violent anti-suffragist and the head of the local league, whose motto was that woman's place is in the home. She was kept away from home a good deal in the furtherance of this creed.

Jim Greeley, the normal business man, spent his days at his desk, his evenings at his club, and his free afternoons at baseball games. Sometimes he added a little variety to the peace of his household by rolling in late, lyrical and incoherent.

There was a general impression about town that he found his home so well ordered that he sought a recreative disorder elsewhere. From the first meeting with him Sheila disliked the way he looked at her. His eyes, as it were, crossed swords with hers playfully and said, "Do you fence?" She found the compliments he murmured to her whenever opportunities arrived uncomfortably unctuous. But there was nothing that she could openly resent.

In the summer all the wives of Blithevale whose husbands had the money or could borrow it followed the national custom and went to the seashore, the mountains, anywhere to get away from home and husband; they took the children with them. The husbands stuck to their jobs and made occasional dashes to their families. All

signs fail in hot weather. Even the churches close up. It is curious. It is even agreed that the rule about woman's place being the home does not hold in hot weather.

Dorothy and Sheila and their youngsters went together one summer to a beach with nearly as much boardwalk as sand.

Sheila fretted about leaving Bret at his lonely grindstone. Dorothy ridiculed her and told her she must get over her honeymoon. Dorothy emphasized the importance of the sea air "for the children." She insisted that a mother's first duty was to them. Dorothy paid little enough heed to her own. She slept late, played cards, watched the dancing, and changed her clothes with a chameleonic frequence.

Sheila found that her children, like the rest, preferred the company of fellow-children and the sea to any other attractions. Their mothers bored them, hampered them, disgraced them. The children were self-sufficient, and better so. By the early evening they had played themselves into a comatose condition and never knew who took off their shoes or put them to bed. The long evenings remained to the mothers and they formed porch-colonies, and rocked and gabbled and stared through the windows at the dancers.

All over the country wives were enjoying their summer divorce. Thousands, millions of wives deserted their husbands and loafed at great cost, and it was all right. But for an actress to desert her husband and work—that was all wrong!

Sheila felt that her husband needed her more than her children did. She pictured him distraught with longing for her. And he was—so far as his business worries gave him time for sentimental worries. Sheila left the children in charge of the governess and fled back to Bret, who was enraptured at the sight of her and had an enormous amount of factory news to tell her.

The men-folk were working in spite of the summer, and glad to be working. Bret was absorbed in his business and left Sheila all day to sit in the darkened oven of the closed-up house, alone.

She contrasted her life this summer with the summer she had played in the stock company and toiled so hard to furnish amusement to the people who could not get away to seashores or mountains. She wondered wherein her present indolence was an improvement over her period of toil.

Still she was glad to be where her husband could find her in the brief *entr'actes* of his commercial drama. She had learned enough of the village to know that some of the men whose wives left them for the summer found substitutes among the village belles who could not or would not leave the old town.

Sheila had heard a vast amount of gossip concerning Jim Greeley. She had not repeated any of it to Dorothy, of course. It is not according to the rules of the game and only very unpleasant persons do it.

Bret knew of Jim's repute, but did not forbid Jim his house. The village was full of such scandals and it was dangerous to begin cutting and snubbing. When the gossips whispered they made a terrifying picture of village life, yet whenever the theater was mentioned they assumed an air of Pharisaic superiority.

As soon as Sheila hurried back to Blithevale Jim Greeley began to spoil her evening communions with her husband by "just dropping round." He talked till Bret yawned him home.

Still, Sheila was glad to keep Jim interested in respectable conversation, for Dorothy's sake. Sometimes when Bret had to go back to his office, after dinner, and Jim was free, he just dropped round just the same.

On these occasions he seemed to be laboring under some excitement, full of audacious impulses restrained by timidity. Sheila felt a nausea at her suspicions; she was ashamed of them.

One cruelly hot evening when Bret was at the factory and the only stir of air eddied in a vine-covered corner of the big piazza she heard Jim come up the walk. She did not speak, hoping that he would go away. But he called her twice, and she had to answer.

He invited himself to sit down, and after violently casual chatter began to talk of his loneliness and her kindliness. She was his one salvation, he said.

In the dusk he was only a voice, a voice of longing and appeal, like a disembodied Satan in a mood of desire. In the gloom she felt his hand brush hers, then cling. She drew hers away. His followed. It was very strange that two beings should conflict so tangibly, audibly, without any other evidence of existence.

Suddenly she knew that he was standing close to her, bending over her. She pushed her chair back and rose. Unseen arms caught her to a ghost as invisible and ineluctable as the wrestler with Jacob.

Sheila was horrified. She blamed herself more than Jim. She hated herself and humanity. "Don't! please!" she pleaded in a whisper. She dreaded to have the servants overhear such an encounter. Jim misinterpreted her motive, clenched her tighter, and tried to find her lips with his.

"I thought you were Bret's friend," she protested as she hid her face from him.

"I like Bret," Jim whispered in a frenzy, "but I love you. And I want you to love me. You do! You must! Kiss me!"

She tried to release the proved weapon of her elbow, but he held her by the wrists till she wrenched her hand loose with great pain and gave him her knuckles for a kiss.

The shock to his self-esteem was more than to his mouth, and he let her go. She rebuked him in guttural disgust:

"I suppose you think that because I'm an actress you've got to be a cad."

"No, no," he mumbled. "It's just because you are you, and because you are so wonderful. Forgive me, won't you?"

Even as he asked for forgiveness his hand sought her arm again. She slipped away and went into the starlight and sat on the steps.

"You'd better go now," she said, "and you'd better not come back."

"All right," he sighed.

In the silence she heard Bret's car far away. "Sit down," she said, "and stay awhile. And smoke!"

She had foreseen Bret arriving as Jim hurried away. She did not like the way it would appear. If Bret's suspicions were aroused he could not but look uneasily on her, and once he suspected her she felt that she would never forgive him. And it was altogether odious, too, to be included in the list of women whose names were remembered when Jim Greeley's was mentioned.

And so she conspired with a knave by lies and concealments to keep peace in her husband's home. Jim lighted a cigar and dropped down on the steps, puffing with ostentation.

Sheila looked out on the innocent seeming of the village and the gentle benignity of the stars, and hated to think how much evil could cloak itself and prosper in these deep shadows and soft lights and peaceful hours.

The car bustled to the curb, stopped while Bret got out. Then the chauffeur shot away with it to the garage. Bret came drowsily up the walk, kissed his wife, gripped the hand of his friend, and sat down.

Jim asked how business was, and they talked shop with zest while Sheila sat in utter solitude, watching the village Lothario play the rôle of honest Horatio.

Her husband had spent the day and half the evening at his business, and yet it interested him more than Sheila did. He showed no impatience to be rid of this man, no

eagerness to be alone with his wife who had given up all her own industry to be his companion.

No instinct warned him that his absorption in his business was imperiling his home, nor that his crony was a sneaking conspirator against his happiness.

Sheila was wildly excited, but she pretended to be sleepy and yawningly begged to be excused. It was an hour later before Bret finished talking and she heard him exchange cheery good nights with Jim Greeley. When Bret arrived up-stairs she pretended to be asleep. Before long he was asleep, worn out with honest toil, while she lay battling for the slumber she had not earned. She was sleeping little and ill nowadays, and she rose unrefreshed from unhappy nights to uninteresting days. The effect on her health was growing manifest.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE morning after the Jim Greeley adventure Sheila went back to her children and the seaside. She had no energy and everything bored her. The shock of the surf did not thrill her with new energy; it chilled and weakened her. She found Dorothy all aflutter over the attentions of a rich old widower who complimented her brutally.

Dorothy called him her "conquest" and spoke of her "flirtation." Sheila knew that she used the words rather childishly than with any significance, but her face betrayed a certain dismay.

Dorothy bristled at the shadow of reproof. "Don't look at me like that! I guess if Jim can butterfly around the way he does I'm not going to insult everybody that's nice to me."

Sheila disclaimed any criticism, but the incident alarmed her. And she thought of what Satan provided for idle hands.

Civilization keeps robbing women of their ancient housework. Spinning, weaving, grinding corn, making clothes, and twisting lamp-lighters are gone. Their husbands do not want them to cook or sweep or wait upon their own children. With the loss of their back-breaking, heart-withering old tasks has come a longer life of beauty and desire and a greater leisure for curiosity. They were unhappy and discontented in their former servitude. They are unhappy and discontented in their useless freedom.

Sheila saw everywhere evidences that grown-ups, like children, must either become sloths of indolence, or find

occupation, or take up mischief for a business. She wondered and dreaded what the future might hold for herself.

The summers were not quite so hard to get through, for they had usually been periods of vacation for her. Sometimes she spent a month or two with her father and mother, or they with her. Sometimes old Mrs. Vining visited her and shamed her with the activity that kept the veteran actress alert at seventy years.

Sheila found a cynical amusement in pitting Mrs. Vining and Bret's mother against each other. They began always with great mutual deference, but soon the vinegar of age began to render their comments acidulous. Mrs. Winfield had grown old in the domestic world and the church. Mrs. Vining had grown old in the wicked theater. Of course Sheila was prejudiced, but to save her she could not discover wherein Mrs. Winfield was the better of the two. She was certainly narrower, crueler, more somber. Moreover, she was also less industrious, for to Sheila the hallowed duties of the household were not industry at all, or at best were the proper toil for servants. Mrs. Winfield seemed to her to be a Penelope eternally reweaving each day the same dull pattern she had woven the day before.

When the autumn came her father and mother and Mrs. Vining and the other theater folk emerged from their estivation and made ready for the year's work, while Sheila must return to the idleness of the village, or its more insipid dissipations.

Daughter-in-law and mother-in-law began to get on each other's nerves. Sheila could not forget the glory of the theater. Mrs. Winfield could not outgrow her horror of it, and she could not refrain from nagging allusions to its baleful influences. To Sheila it was a case of the sooty pot eternally railing at the simmering kettle.

One day Sheila was wrought to such a pitch of resentment that she blurted out the whole story of her encounter with Jim Greeley.

"He was no actor," said Sheila, triumphantly, "but he tried to win his friend's wife away."

"Yes," said Mrs. Winfield, "but his friend's wife was an actress."

Against such logic Sheila saw that she would beat her head in vain. She suppressed an inclination to tear her hair out and dance on it. And she gave Mrs. Winfield up as hopeless. Mrs. Winfield had long before given Sheila up as beyond redemption, and eventually she moved away from Blithevale to live with a widowed sister in the Middle West.

Sheila asked herself, bitterly, "What am I getting out of life? When one trouble goes another bobs into its place." By the time the mother-in-law retired the children had grown up to a noisy, uncontrollable restlessness that drove the office-weary Bret frantic.

It was he, and not Sheila, that insisted on their occasional flights to New York, where they made the rounds of the theaters. Sometimes Sheila ran back on the stage to embrace her old friends and tell them how happy she was. And they said they envied her, knowing they lied.

They always asked her, "When are you coming back?" and when she always answered, "Never," they did not believe her. Yet they saw that discontent was aging her. Discontent was never yet a fountain of youth.

Sheila returned to Blithevale like a caught convict. Plays came there occasionally, and Bret liked to see them as an escape from the worries he found at home or the worries that followed him from the office. He enjoyed particularly the entertainments concocted with the much-abused mission of furnishing relaxation for the tired business man. As if the tired business man were not an important and pathetic figure, and his refreshment one of the noblest and most needful acts of charity.

At these times when Sheila sat and watched other people playing, and often playing atrociously, the rôles

that she should have played or would have enjoyed, her homesickness for the boards swept over her in waves of anguish. Sometimes the yearning to act goaded her so cruelly that she almost swooned. She felt like a canary full of song with her tongue cut out.

Now and then Eugene Vickery came to visit his sister Dorothy. He usually spent a deal of time with Bret and Sheila.

He was a different Eugene so far as success and failure can alter a man. That play of his which Sheila had tried in stock and Reben had allowed to lapse Eugene had patched up and sold to another manager who had a star in tow.

Play and star had been flayed with jubilant enthusiasm by the New York critics, but had drawn enough of the public to keep them on Broadway awhile, and then had succeeded substantially on the road in the cheaper theaters known as the "dollar houses."

Vickery the scholar was both irritated and amused by the irony of his success. Almost illiterate journalists called his wisdom trash and only the less sophisticated people would accept it. His feelings were only partly soothed by the dollar anodyne and the solace of regular royalties.

His manager ordered another play, and Vickery tried to write down to his public. The result was a dismal fiasco, critically and box-officially. The lesson was worth the price. He went back to writing for himself in the belief that if he could succeed in the private theater of his own heart he would be sure at least of one sympathetic auditor. That was one more than the insincere writer could count on.

His bookish tastes and training led him to a bookish ideal. He felt that the highest dramatic art was in the blank-verse form, and he felt that there was something nobler in the good old times of costumes and rhetoric.

In fact, blank verse demanded heroic garb, for when the words strut the speakers must. His Americanism was revealed only in the fact that he chose for his chief character a man struggling for liberty, for the right of being himself.

He selected the epic argosy of the Puritans and their battle for freedom of worship. His central figure was a granite and velvet soul of the type of Roger Williams.

He told Sheila and Bret a little about his scheme and they thought it wonderful. Bret found any literary creation incredibly ingenious, though more brilliant mental processes applied to mechanical problems seemed simple enough.

Sheila thought Vickery's plan wonderful because her heart swelled at the lofty program of the plot. Blank verse had been her first religion and Shakespeare her first Scripture. It was one of her bitterest regrets that she had never paid the master the tribute of a performance of any of his works since she adapted his "Hamlet" to the needs of her own children's theater.

"Who's going to play your hero?" Bret asked, idly.

Vickery answered, "Well, I haven't read it to him yet, but there's only one man in the country with the brains and the skill and the good looks."

"And who might all that be?" Sheila asked, with a laugh.

"Floyd Eldon."

The name seemed to drop into a well of silence.

Vickery had forgotten for the moment the feud of the two men. The silence recalled it to him. He spoke with vexation:

"Good Lord, people! haven't you got over that ancient trouble yet? When a grudge gets more than so old the board of health ought to cart it away. Eldon's got over it, I know. A year or two ago he was telling me how kindly he felt toward Sheila and how he didn't really blame Bret."

Bret was not at all obliged for Eldon's magnanimity, but Vickery went on singing Eldon's praises till he noticed the profound silence of his auditors. He suddenly felt as if he had been speaking in an empty room. He saw that Bret was sullen and Sheila uneasy. Vickery spread the praise a little thicker in sheer vexation.

"Reben is going to star Eldon the minute he finds his play. I'm hoping I can fit him with this. He's on the way up and I want to ride up on his coat-tails. He's a gentleman, a scholar, an athlete—"

"But, after all, he's an actor," sniffed Bret.

"So was Shakespeare, the noblest mind in English literature."

"I don't care for the type," said Bret. "Always posing, always talking about themselves."

"Thanks, dear," said Sheila, flushing.

"Oh, I don't mean you, honey," Bret expostulated. "That's why I loved you—you almost never talk about yourself. You're everything that's fine."

Vickery tried to restore the conversation to safer generalities. "Actors talk about their personality sometimes because that is what they are putting on the market. But did you ever hear traveling-men talk about their line of goods? or clergymen about the church? or manufacturers about what they are making? Do you ever talk shop yourself?"

"Oh no!" Sheila laughed ironically, and now Bret flushed.

"Shop talk is merely a question of manners," said Vickery. "Some people know enough not to talk about themselves, and some don't. There are lots of old women that will talk you to death about their cooks and their aches. I'm one of those who jaw about themselves all the time. It's not because I'm conceited, for the Lord knows I have too much reason for modesty. It's just a habit. Eldon hasn't got it. He'll talk about a rôle, or about an audience, but you'll never hear him praise himself. And there are plenty of actors like him."

Bret grunted his disbelief.

"You don't know enough of them to be a judge," Vickery insisted.

"No, and I don't want to," Bret growled. "I prefer good, honest, wholesome, normal, real men—men like Jim Greeley and other friends of mine."

A little shiver passed through Sheila. Bret felt it, and assumed that she was distressed at hearing Eldon's name taken in vain. Vickery was not impressed with the choice of his brother-in-law as an ideal. Dorothy had told him too much about Jim. He did not suspect, however, that Sheila had cause to loathe him. He continued to talk his own shop, and to praise Eldon, to celebrate his progress, his increasing science in the dynamics of theatricism.

"He's becoming a great comedian," he said. "And comedy requires brains. Pathos and tragedy are more or less matters of emotion and temperament, but comedy is a science."

As Vickery chanted Eldon up, Sheila's eyes began to glow again. Bret fumed with jealousy, imputing that glow of hers to enthusiasm for Eldon.

The fact was that she was thinking of Eldon without a trace of affection. She was thinking of him as a successful competitor, as a beginner who was forging ahead and growing expert, growing famous while she had fallen out of the race.

She was more jealous of Eldon than Bret was.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SHEILA suffered the very same feeling to a more sickening degree, a little later, when "The Woman Pays" company, now in its fourth year, reached Blithevale in cleaning up the lesser one-night stands. The play that Sheila had rejected had become the corner-stone of Reben's fortunes. It was as inartistic and plebeian and reminiscent as apple pie. But the public loves apple pie and consumes tons of it, to the great neglect of *marrons glacés*.

That play was a commodity for which there is always a market. A great artist could adorn it, but it was almost actor-proof against destruction.

Even Dulcie Ormerod could not spoil it for its public. When she played it Batterson gnashed his teeth and Reben held his aching head, but there were enough injudicious persons left to make up eight good audiences a week.

Dulcie "killed her laughs" by fidgeting or by reading humorously or by laughing herself. She lost the audience's tears by the copiousness of her own. But she loved the play and still "knew she was great because she wept herself." When she laughed she showed teeth that speedily earned a place in the advertisement of dentifrice, and when she wept, a certain sort of audience was overawed by the sight of a genuine tear. Real water has always been impressive on the stage.

By sheer force of longevity the play slid her up among the prominent women of the day. She stuck to the rôle for four years, and was beginning to hope to rival the

records of Joseph Jefferson, Denman Thompson, Maggie Mitchell, and Lotta.

The night the company played in Blithevale Bret and Eugene, Sheila, Dorothy and her Jim, made up a box-party.

Jim proclaimed that Dulcie was a "peach," but he alluded less to the art she did not possess than to the charms she had. She was pretty, there was no question of that—as shapely and characterless as a Bouguereau painting, as coarsely sweet as granulated sugar. Dorothy credited her with all the winsome qualities of the character she assumed, and took a keen dislike to the actress who played the adventuress, an estimable woman and a genuine artist whose oxfords Dulcie was not fit to untie.

Eugene and Sheila suffered from Dulcie's utter falsehood of impersonation. Even Bret felt some mysterious gulf between Dulcie's interpretation and Sheila's as he remembered it.

Sheila was afraid to speak her opinion of Dulcie lest it seem mere jealousy. Eugene voiced it for her.

"To think that such a heifer is a star! Getting rich and getting admiration," he growled, "while a genius like Sheila rusts in idleness. It's a crime."

"It's all my fault," said Bret. "I cut her out of it."

"Don't you believe it, honey," Sheila cooed. "I'd rather be starring in your home than earning a million dollars before the public."

But somehow there was a clank of false rhetoric in the speech. It was lover's extravagance, and even Bret felt that it could not quite be true, or that, if it were true, somehow it ought not to be.

He felt himself a dog in the manger, yet he was glad that Sheila was not up there with some actor's arms about her.

After the third act Dulcie sent the company-manager—still Mr. McNish—to invite Mrs. Winfield to come back at the end of the play.

Sheila had hoped to escape this test of her nerves, but there was no escape. She felt that if Dulcie were haughty over her success she would hate her, and if she were not haughty and tried to be gracious she would hate her more.

Dulcie assumed the latter rôle and played it badly. She condescended as from a great height, patronized like a society patroness. Worse yet, she pawed Sheila and called her "Sheila" and "dearie" and congratulated her on having such a nice quiet life in such a dear little village, while "poor me" had to play forty weeks a year. Sheila wanted to scratch her big doll-eyes out.

On the way home Bret confessed that it rather hurt him to see a "dub like Dulcie rattling round in Sheila's shoes." The metaphor was meant better than it came out, but Sheila was not thinking of that when she groaned:

"Don't speak of it."

Bret invited Vickery to stop in for a bit of supper and Vickery accepted, to Bret's regret. Sheila excused herself from lingering and left Bret to smoke out Vickery, who was in a midnight mood of garrulity. The playwright watched Sheila trudge wearily up the staircase, worn out with lack of work. He turned on Bret and growled:

"Bret, there goes the pitifulest case of frustrated genius I ever saw. It's a sin to chain a great artist like that to a baby-carriage."

Bret turned scarlet at the insolence of this, but Vickery was too feeble to be knocked down. He was leaner than ever, and his eyes were like wet buckeyes. His speech was punctuated with coughs. As he put it, he "coughed commas." Also he coughed cigarette-smoke usually. His friends blamed his cough to his cigarettes, but they knew better, and so did he.

He was in a hurry to do some big work before he was coughed out. It infuriated him to feel genius within himself and have so little strength or time for its expression. It enraged him to see another genius with health

and every advantage kept from publication by a husband's selfishness.

He was in one of his irascible spells to-night and he had no mercy on Bret. He spoke with the fretful tyranny of an invalid.

"It's none of my business, I suppose, Bret, but I tell you it makes me sick—sick! to see Sheila cooped up in this little town. New York would go wild over her—yes, and London, too. There's an awful dearth on the stage of young women with beauty and training. She could have everything her own way. She's a peculiarly brilliant artist who never had her chance. If she had reached her height and quit—fine! But she was snuffed out just as she was beginning to glow. It was like lighting a lamp and blowing it out the minute the flame begins to climb on the wick.

"Dulcie Ormerod and hundreds of her sort are buzzing away like cheap gas-jets while a Sheila Kemble is here. She could be making thousands of people happy, softening their hearts, teaching them sympathy and charm and breadth of outlook; and she's teaching children not to rub their porridge-plates in their hair!

"Thousands used to listen to every syllable of hers and forget their troubles. Now she listens to your factory troubles. She listens to the squabbles of a couple of nice little kids who would rather be outdoors playing with other kids all day, as they ought to be.

"It's like taking a lighthouse and turning the lens away from the sea into the cabbage-patch of the keeper."

"Go right on," Bret said, with labored restraint. "Don't mind me. I'm old-fashioned. I believe that a good home with a loving husband and some nice kids is good enough for a good woman. I believe that such a life is a success. Where should a wife be but at home?"

"That depends on the wife, Bret. Most wives belong at home, yes. Most men belong at home, too. They are born farmers and shoemakers and school-teachers and

chemists and inventors, and all glory to them for staying there. But where did Christopher Columbus belong? Where would you be if he had stayed at home?"

"But Sheila isn't a man!"

"Well, then, did Florence Nightingale belong at home? or Joan of Arc?"

"Oh, well, nurses and patriots and people like that!"

"What about Jenny Lind and Patti?"

"They were singers."

"And Sheila is a singer, only in unaccompanied recitative. Actors are nurses and doctors, too; they take people who are sick of their hard day's work and they cure 'em up, give 'em a change of climate."

"Home was good enough for our mothers," Bret grumbled, sinking back obstinately in his chair.

"Oh no, it wasn't."

"They were contented."

"Contented! hah! that's a word we use for other people's patience. Old-fashioned women were not contented. We say they were because other people's sorrows don't bother us, especially when they are dead. But they mattered then to them. If you ever read the newspapers of those days, or the letters, or the novels, or the plays, you'll find that people were not contented in the past at any time.

"People used to say that laborers were contented to be treated like cattle. But they weren't, and since they learned how to lift their heads they've demanded more and more."

Bret had been having a prolonged wrestle with a labor-union. He snarled: "Don't you quote the laboring-men to me. There's no satisfying them!"

"And it's for the good of the world that they should demand more. It's for the good of the world that everybody should be doing his best, and getting all there is in it and out of it and wanting more."

"Is nobody to stay at home?"

"Of course! There's my sister Dorothy—nicest girl in the world, but not temperamental enough to make a flea wink. She's got sense enough to know it. You couldn't drive her on the stage. Why the devil didn't you marry her? Then you both could have stayed at home. You belong at home because you're a manufacturer. I should stay at home because I'm a writer. But a postman oughtn't to stay at home, or a ship-captain, or a fireman."

Bret attempted a mild sarcasm: "So all the women ought to leave home and go on the stage, eh?"

Vickery threw up his hands. "God forbid! I think that nine-tenths of the actresses ought to leave the stage and go home. Too many of them are there because there was nowhere else to go or they drifted in by accident. Nice, stupid, fatheads who would be the makings of a farm or an orphan-asylum are trying to interpret complicated rôles. Dulcie Ormerod ought to be waiting on a lunch-counter, sassing brakemen and brightening the lot of the traveling-men. But women like Mrs. Siddons and Ellen Terry, Bernhardt and Duse and Charlotte Cushman and Marlowe and any number of others, including Mrs. Bret Winfield, ought to be traveling the country like missionaries of art and culture and morality."

"Morality!" Bret roared. "The stage is no place for a good woman, and you know it."

"Oh, bosh! In the first place, what is a good woman?"

"A woman who is virtuous and honorable and industrious and— Well, you know what 'good' means as well as I do."

"I know a lot better than you do, you old mud-turtle. There are plenty of good women on the stage. And there are plenty of bad ones off. There are more Commandments than one, and more than one way for a woman to be bad. There are plenty of wives here in Blithevale whose physical fidelity you could never question, though they're simply wallowing in other sins. You know lots

of wives that you can't say a word against except that they are loafers, money-wasters, naggers of children, torturers of husbands, scourges of neighbors, enemies of everything worth while—otherwise they are all right.

"They neglect their little ones' minds; never teach them a lofty ideal; just teach them hatred and lying and selfishness and snobbery and spite and conceit. They make religion a cloak for backbiting and false witness. And they're called good women. I tell you it's an outrage on the word 'good.' 'Good' is a great word. It ought to be used for something besides 'the opposite of sensual'!"

"All right," Bret agreed, "use it any way you want to. You'll admit, I suppose, that a good woman ought to perpetuate her goodness. A good woman ought to have children."

"Yes, if she can."

"And take care of them and sacrifice herself for them."

"Why sacrifice herself?"

"So that the race may progress."

"How is it going to progress if you sacrifice the best fruits of it? Suppose the mother is a genius of the highest type, a beautiful-bodied, brilliant-minded, wholesome genius. Why should she be sacrificed to her children? They can't be any greater than she is. Since genius isn't inherited or taught, they'll undoubtedly be inferior. And at that they may die before they grow up. Why kill a sure thing for a doubtful one?"

"You don't believe in the old-fashioned woman."

"She's still as much in fashion as she ever was. The old-fashionedest woman on record was Eve. She meddled and got her husband fired out of Paradise. And she never had any stage ambitions or asked for a vote or wore Paris clothes, but she wasn't much of a success as a wife; and as a mother all we know of her home influence was that one of her sons killed the other and got driven into the wilderness. You can't do much worse than that.

Even if Eve had been an actress and gone on the road, her record couldn't have been much worse, could it?"

Bret was boxing heavily and sleepily with a contemptuous patience. "You think women ought to be allowed to go gadding about wherever they please?"

"Of course I do! What's the good of virtue that is due to being in jail? We know that men are more honest, more decent, more idealistic, more romantic, than women. Why? Because we have liberty. Because we have ourselves to blame for our rottenness. Because we've got nobody to hide behind. The reason so many women are such liars and gossips and so merciless to one another is because they are so penned in, because all the different kinds of women are expected to live just the same way after they are married. But some of them are bad mothers because they have no outlet for their genius. Some of them would be better wives if they had more liberty."

Bret was entirely unconvinced. "You're not trying to tell me that the stage is better than the average village?"

"No, but I think it's as good. There will never be any lack of sin. But the sin that goes on in harems and jails and hide-bound communities is worse than the sin of free people busily at work in the splendid fields of art and science and literature and drama and commerce.

"I think Sheila belongs to the public. I don't see why she couldn't be a better wife and a better mother for being an eminent artist. And I like you, Bret, so much. You're as decent a fellow at heart as anybody I know. I hate to have it you, of all men, that's crushing Sheila's soul out of her. I hate to think that I introduced you to her. And I let you cut me out.

"She wouldn't have loved me if she'd married me, but, by the Lord Harry! her name would be a household word in all the homes in the country instead of just one."

Vickery dropped to a divan and lay outstretched, exhausted with his oration. Bret sat with his lips pursed

and his fingers gabled in long meditation. At length he spoke:

"I'm not such a brute as you think, 'Gene. I don't want to sacrifice anybody to myself, least of all the woman I idolize. If Sheila wants to leave me and go back, I'll not hinder her. I couldn't if I wanted to. There's no law that enables a man to get out an injunction against his wife going on the stage. If she wants to go, why doesn't she?"

Vickery sat up on the couch and snapped: "Because she loves you, damn it! I'm madder at her than I am at you." Then he fell back again, puffing his cigarette spitefully.

Bret smoked slowly at a long cigar. He was thinking long thoughts.

A little later Vickery spoke again: "Besides, Sheila won't say she wants to go back, for fear it would hurt your feelings."

Bret took this very seriously. "You think so?"

"I know so."

Bret smoked his cigar to ash, then he rose with effort and solemnity, went to the door, and called, "Oh, Sheila!"

From somewhere in the clouds came her voice—the beautiful Sheila voice, "Yes, dear."

"Come to the stairs a minute, will you?"

"Yes, dear."

Vickery had risen wonderingly. He could not see Sheila's nightcapped head as she looked over the balustrade. He did not know that Sheila had been listening to his eulogy of her and agreeing passionately with his regrets at her idleness.

"'Gene here," said Bret, "has been roasting me for keeping you off the stage. I want him to hear me tell you that I'm not keeping you off the stage. Do you want to go on the stage, Sheila?"

Sheila's voice was housewifely and matter-of-fact. "Of course not. I want to go to bed. And it's time 'Gene was in his. Send him home."

She heard Bret cry, "You see!" and heard his triumphant laughter as he clapped Vickery on the shoulder. Then she went to her room and locked herself in. The click of the bolt had the sound of a jailer's key. She was a prisoner in a cell, in a solitary confinement, since her husband's soul was leagues away from any sympathy with hers. She paced the floor like a caged panther, and when the sobs came she fell on her knees and silenced them in her pillow lest Bret hear her. She had made her renunciation and plighted her troth. She would keep faith with her lover though she felt that it was killing her. Her soul was dying of starvation.

CHAPTER XLIX

VICKERY went to his sister's house and sat up all night, working on his play for Eldon. For months he toiled and moiled upon it. Sometimes he would write all day and all night upon a scene, and work himself up into a state of what he called soul-sweat.

He would go to bed patting himself on the shoulder and talking to himself as if he were a draught-horse and a Pegasus combined: "Good boy, 'Gene! Good work, old Genius!"

In the morning he would wake feeling all the after-effects of a prolonged carouse. He would reach for a cigarette and review with contempt all he had previously done. No critic could have reviled his work with less sympathy.

"By night I write plays and by day I write criticisms," he would say.

Lazily he would cough himself out of bed, cough through his tub and into his clothes, and go to his table like a surly butcher to carve his play with long slashes of the blue pencil.

At length he had it as nearly finished as any play is likely to be before it has been read. He went to New York, where Eldon was playing, and easily persuaded him to listen to the drama. Vickery would not explain the story of the play beforehand.

"I want you to get it the way the audience does."

He marched his buskined blank verse with the elocution of a poet and all the sonority his raucous voice could lend him. He was shocked to note that Eldon was not helping

him along with enthusiasm. His voice wavered, faltered, sank. He was hardly audible at the climax of his big third act.

Here the Puritan hero, who had left the Old World for the New World and liberty, discovered that the other Puritans wanted liberty only for themselves, and so abhorred his principles of toleration that they exiled him into the wilderness, mercilessly expecting him to perish in the blizzards or at the hands of the Indians. The hero, like another Roger Williams, turned and denounced them, then vowed to found a state where a man could call his soul his own, and plunged into the storm.

Vickery closed the manuscript and gulped down a glass of water. He had not looked at Eldon for two acts; he did not look at him now. He simply growled, "Sorry it bored you so."

"It doesn't bore me!" Eldon protested. "It's magnificent—"

"But—" Vickery prompted.

"But nothing. Only—well—you see you said it was a play for me, and I—I've been trying to like it for myself. But—well, it's too good for me. I feel like a man who ordered a suit of overalls and finds that the tailor has brought him an ermine robe and velvet breeches. It's too gorgeous for me."

"Nonsense!" said Vickery. "You don't have to soft-soap me. Why don't you like it?"

"I do! As a work of art it is a masterpiece. The fault is mine. You see, I admire the classic blank-verse plays so much that I wish people wouldn't try to write any more of them. They're not in the spirit of our age. In Shakespeare's time men wore long curls and combed them in public, and tied love-knots in them and wrote madigrals and picked their teeth artistically with a golden picktooth. The best of them cried like babies when their feelings were hurt.

"Nowadays we'd lynch a man that behaved as they did. Then they tried to use the most eloquent words. Now we try to use the simplest or, better yet, none at all. I think that our way is bigger than theirs, but, anyway, it's our way.

"And then the Puritans. I admire them in spots. My people came over in one of the early boats. But plays about Puritans never succeed. Do you know why? It's because the Puritans preached the gospel of Don't! Everything was Don't—don't dance, don't sing, don't kiss, don't have fun, don't wear bright colors, don't go to plays, don't have a good time. But the theater is the place where people go to have a good time, a good laugh, a good cry, or a good scare. The whole soul of the theater is to reconcile people with life and with one another.

"The Puritans call the theater immoral. It is so blamed moral that it is untrue to life half the time, for wickedness always has to be punished in the theater, and we know it isn't in real life.

"And another thing, Vick, why should the theater do anything for the Puritans? They never did anything for us except to tear down the playhouses and call the actors hard names. And what good came of it all?

"Here's a book I picked up about the Puritans, because it has a lot about my ancestors. They had a daughter named Remember and a son named Wrastle. But look at this." Eldon got up, found the volume, and hunted for the page, as he raged: "Now the Puritans in our country had none of the alleged causes of immorality—they had no novels, no plays, no grand or comic operas, no nude art, no vaudeville, no tango, and no moving pictures. They ought to have been pretty good, eh? Well, take a peek at what their Governor William Bradford writes."

He handed the book to Vickery, whose eyes roved along the page:

Anno Dom: 1642. Marvilous it may be to see and consider how some kind of wickednes did grow breake forth here, in a land wher the same was so much witnesed against, and so narrowly looked unto, & severly punished when it was knowne; as in no place more, and so much, that I have known or head of . . . . . espetially drunkennes and unclainnes; not only incontinencie betweene persons unmaried, for which many both men & women have been punished sharply enough, but some maried persons allso. . . things fearful to name have broak forth in this land, oftener then once . . . one reason may be, that ye Divell may carrie a greater spite against the churches of Christ and ye gospell hear, by how much ye more they endeavor to preserve holynes and puritie amongst them . . . that he might cast a blemishe & staine upon them in ye eyes of ye world, who use to be rashe in judgmente.

Vickery smiled sheepishly, and Eldon relieved him of the book, exclaiming:

"Think of it, those terribly protected people were so bad they could only explain it by saying that Satan worked overtime! There is one of the most hideous stories in here ever published and you can find facts that make *The Scarlet Letter* look innocent."

Vickery protested, mildly: "Of course the Puritans were human and intolerant. That's the whole point of my play, the struggle of a man against them."

Eldon opposed him still. "But why should we worry over that? The Puritans have been pretty well whipped out. Liberty is pretty well secured for men in America. Why try to excite an audience about what they all are as used to as the air they breathe? Let Russia write about such things. Why not write a play about the exciting things of our own days? If you want liberty for a theme, why don't you write about the fight the women are waging for freedom? Turn your hero into a heroine; turn your Puritans into conservative men and women of the day who stand just where they did. Show up the modern home as this book shows up the old Puritans."

Vickery was dazed. Of all the critical suggestions he

had ever heard, this was the most radical, to change the hero to a heroine, and *vice versa*.

He stared at Eldon. "Are you in favor of woman suffrage, you, of all men?"

Eldon laughed. "You might as well ask me if I am in favor of the coming winter or the hot spell or the next earthquake. All I know is that my opposition wouldn't make the slightest difference to them and that I might as well reconcile myself to them.

"There's nothing on this earth except death and the taxes that's surer to come than the equality of women—in the sense of equality that men mean. The first place where women had a chance was the stage; it's the only place now where they are put on the same footing with the men. They have every advantage that men have, and earn as much money, or more, and have just as many privileges, or more. The one question asked is,'Can you deliver the goods?' That's the question they ask of a business man, or painter, or sculptor, or architect, or soldier. Private morals are an important question, but a separate question, just as they are with men.

"So the stage is the right place for freedom to be preached by women, because that is the place where it is practised. The stage ought to lend its hand to free others because it is free itself."

Vickery was beginning to kindle with the new idea, though his kindling meant the destruction of the building he had worked on so hard. He made one further objection: "You're not seriously urging me to write a suffragette play, are you?"

"Lord help us, no!" Eldon snorted. "The suffragette is less entertaining on the stage than the Puritan, or the abolitionist, or any fighter for a doctrine. What the stage wants is the story of individuals, not of parties, or sects, or creeds. Leave sermons to the pulpits and lectures to the platform. The stage wants stories. If you can sneak in a bit of doctrine, all right, but it must be smuggled.

Why don't you write a play about the tragedy of a woman who has great gifts and can't use them—a throttled genius like—well, like Sheila Kemble, for instance?"

"Oh, Sheila!" Vickery sighed. But the theme became personal, concrete, real at once. He made still a last weak objection: "But I wrote this play for you. I wanted to see you star in it."

Eldon thought a moment, then he said: "You write the play for the woman, and let me play her husband. Give her all the fire you want, and make me just an every-day man with a wife he loves and admires and wants to keep, and doesn't want to destroy. You do that and I'll play the husband and I'll give the woman star the fight of her life to keep me from running away with the piece. Don't make the husband brilliant or heroic; just a stupid, stubborn, every-day man, and give him the worst of it everywhere. That all helps the actor. The woman will be divine, the man will be human. And he'll get the audience—the women as well as the men."

Vickery began to see the play forming on the interior sky of his skull, vaguely yet vividly as clouds take shape and gleam. "If only Sheila could play it," he said.

Eldon tossed his hands in despair.

Vickery began to babble as the plot spilled down into his brain in a cloudburst of ideas: "I might take Sheila for my theme. To disguise her decently she could be—say— Let me see— I've got it!—a singer! Her voice has thrilled Covent Garden and the Metropolitan and she marries a nice man and has some children and sings 'em little cradle-songs. She loves them and she loves her husband, but she is bursting with bigger song—wild, glorious song. Shall she stick to the nursery or shall she leave her babies every now and then and give the world a chance to hear her? Her mother-in-law and the neighbors say, 'The opera is immoral, the singers are immoral, the librettos are immoral, the managers are immoral; you

stay in the nursery, except on Sundays, and then you may sing in the choir.'

"But she remembers when she sang the death-love of Isolde in the Metropolitan with an orchestra of a hundred trying in vain to drown her; she remembers how she climbed and climbed till she was in heaven, and how she took five thousand people there with her, and— Oh, you can see it! It's Trilby without Svengali; it's Trilby as a mother and a wife. It's all womankind."

His thoughts were stampeded with the new excitement. He picked up the play he had loved so well and worked for so hard, and would have tossed it into the fire if Eldon's room had not been heated by a steam-radiator. He flung it on the floor with contempt:

"That!" and he trampled it as the critics would have trampled it had it been laid at their feet.

"What to call my play?" he pondered, aloud. "It's always easier for me to write the play than select the name." As he screwed up his face in thought a memory came to him. "My mother told me once that when she was a little girl in the West her father wounded a wild swan and brought it home. She cared for it till it got well, then he clipped one of its wings so that it could not balance itself to fly. It grew tame and stayed about the garden, but it was always trying to fly.

"One day my grandfather noticed that the clipped wing was growing out and he sent a farm-hand to trim it down again. The fellow didn't understand how birds fly, and he clipped the long wing down to the length of the short one. The bird walked about, trying its pinions. It found that, short as they were, they balanced each other.

"She walked to a high place and suddenly leaped off into the air; my mother saw her and thought she would fall. But her wings held her up. They beat the air and she sailed away."

"Did she ever come back?" Eldon asked.

"She never came back. But she was a bird and didn't

belong in a garden. A woman would come back. We used to have pigeons at home. We clipped their wings at first, too, till they learned the cote. Then we let them free. You could see them circling about in the sky. Pigeons come back. I'm going to call my play 'Clipped Wings.' How's that for a title?—'Clipped Wings'!"

Eldon was growing incandescent, too, but he advised caution:

"Be easy on the allegory, boy, or you'll have only allegorical audiences. Stick to the real and the real people will come to see it. Go on and write it, and don't forget I play the husband; I saw him first. Don't write a lecture, now; promise me you won't preach or generalize. You stick to your story of those two people, and let the audience generalize on the way home. And don't let your dialogue sparkle too much. Every-day people don't talk epigrams. Give them every-day talk. That's as great and twice as difficult as blank verse.

"Don't try to sweeten the husband. Let him roar like a bull, and everybody will understand and forgive him. I tell you the new wife has it all her own way. She's venturing out into new fields. The new husband is the one I'm sorry for.

"I hate Winfield for taking Sheila off the stage, and I hate him for keeping her away. But if I were in his place I'd do the same. I'd hate myself, but I'd keep her. The more you think of it, the harder the husband job is.

"The new husband of the new woman is up against the biggest problem of the present time and of the future: what are husbands going to do about their wives' ambitions? What are wives going to do about their husbands' rights to a home? Where do the children come in? It doesn't do the kids much good to have 'em brought up in a home of discontent by a broken-hearted mother raising her daughter to go through the same tragedy. But they ought to have a chance.

"There's a new triangle in the drama. It's not a

question of a lover outside; the third member is the wife's ambition. Go to it, my boy—and give us the story."

Vickery stumbled from the room like a sleep-walker. The whole play was present in his brain, as a cathedral in the imagination of an architect.

When he came to drawing the details of the cathedral, and figuring out the ground-plan, stresses, and strains, the roof supports, the flying buttresses, the cost of material, and all the infernally irreconcilable details—that was quite another thing yet.

But he plunged into it as into a brier-patch and floundered about with a desperate enthusiasm. His health ebbed from him like ink from his pen. His doctor ordered him to rest and to travel, and he sought the mountains of New York for a while. But he would not stop work. His theme dragged him along and he hoped only that his zest for writing would not give out before the play was finished. If afterward his life also gave out, he would not much care.

He had lost Sheila, and Sheila had lost herself. If he could find his work, that would be something at least.

CHAPTER L

THERE was a certain birch-tree on the hill behind the old Winfield homestead.

The house itself sat well back in its ample green lawn, left fenceless after the manner of American village lawns. In the rear of the house there were many acres of gardens and pasture where cattle stood about, looking in the distance like toy cows out of a Noah's Ark.

Beyond the pasture was the steep hill they flattered with the name of "the mountain." To the children it furnished an unfailing supply of Indians, replenished as fast as they were slaughtered.

Every now and then Sheila had to be captured and tied to a tree and danced around by little Polly and young Bret and their friends, bedecked with feathers from dismantled dusters, brandishing "tommyhawks" and shooting with "bonarrers."

Just as the terrified pale-face squaw was about to be given over to the torture the Indians would disappear, take off their feathers, rub the war mud off their noses, and lay aside their barbarous weapons; then arming themselves with wooden guns, they would charge to Sheila's rescue, fearlessly annihilating the wraiths of their late selves.

One day when Sheila was bound to the tree she saw Bret stealing up to watch the game. He waved gaily to her and she nodded to him. Then the whim came to her to cease burlesquing the familiar rôle and play it for all it was worth. She imagined herself really one of those countless women whom the Indians captured and sub-

jected to torment. Perhaps some woman, the wife of a pioneer, had once met her hideous doom in this same forest. She fancied she saw her house in flames and Bret shot dead as he fought toward her. She writhed and tugged at the imaginary and unyielding thongs. She pleaded for mercy in babbling hysteria, and for a climax sent forth one sincere scream of awful terror. If Dorothy's mother had heard it she would have remembered the shriek of the little Ophelia.

Sheila noted that the redskins were silent. She looked about her through eyes streaming with fictional tears. She saw that Bret was plunging toward her, ashen with alarm. The neighbors' children were aghast and her own boy and girl petrified. Then Polly and young Bret flung themselves on her in a frenzy of weeping sympathy.

Sheila began to laugh and Bret looked foolish. He explained:

"I thought a snake was coiled round you. Don't do that again, in Heaven's name." That night he dreamed of her cry.

It was a long while before Sheila could comfort her children and convince them that it was all "pretend."

After that, when they were incorrigible, she could always cow them by threatening, "If you don't I'll scream."

The children would have been glad to make little canoes from the bark of the birch, but Sheila would not let them peel off the delicate human-like skin. The tree meant much to her, for she and Bret had been wont to climb up to it before there were any amateur Indians. Bret had carved their names on it in two linked hearts.

On the lawn in front of the house there was another birch-tree. It amused Bret to name the tree on the hill "Sheila" and the tree on the lawn "Bret." And the nearest approach he ever made to poetry was to pretend that they were longing for each other. He probably absorbed that idea from the dimly remembered lyric of the pine-tree and the palm.

Sheila suggested that the birch from the lawn should climb up and dwell with the lonely tree on the heights. Bret objected that he and Sheila would never see them then, for they made few such excursions nowadays.

It struck him as a better idea to bring "Sheila" down to "Bret." He decided to surprise his wife with the view of them together. He chose a day when Sheila was to take the children to a Sunday-school picnic. On his way to the office he spoke to the old German gardener he had inherited from his father. When Bret told him of his inspiration the old man (Gottlieb Hauf, his name was) shook his head and crinkled his thin lips with the superiority of learning for ignorance. He drawled:

"You shouldn't do so," and, as if the matter were ended, bent to snip a shrub he was manicuring.

"But I want it," Bret insisted.

"You shouldn't vant it," and snipped again.

Opposition always hardened Bret. He took the shears from the old man and stood him up. "You do as I tell you—for once."

Gottlieb could be stubborn, too. "Und I tell you die Birke don't vant it. She don't like it down here."

"The other birch-tree is flourishing down here."

"Dot makes nuttink out. Die Birke up dere she like vere she is. She like plenty sun."

"This one grows in the shade."

"Diese Birke don't know nuttink about sun. She alvays grows im Schatten."

"Well, the other one would like the shade if it had a chance. You bring it down here."

The old man shook his head stubbornly and reached for the shears.

Bret was determined to have his own way. "Is it my tree or yours?"

"She is your tree—but she don't like. You move her, she dies."

"Bosh! You do as you're told."

"All right. I move her."

"To-day?"

"Next vinter."

"Now!"

"*Um Gotteswillen!* She dies sure. Next vinter or early sprink, maybe she has a chence, but to move her in summer—no!"

"Yes!"

"*Nein doch!*"

Bret choked with rage. "You move that tree to-day or you move yourself out of here."

Gottlieb hesitated for a long while, but he felt that he was too old to be transplanted. Besides, that tree up there was none of his own children. He consented with as bad grace as possible. He moved the tree, grumbling, and doing his best for the poor thing. He took as large a ball of earth with the roots as he could manage, but he had to sever unnumbered tiny shoots, and the voyage down the mountain filled him with misgivings.

When Bret came home that night the two trees stood close together like Adam and Eve whitely saluting the sunset. Over them a great tulip-tree towered a hundred feet in air, and all aglow with its flowers like a titanic bridal bouquet. When the bedraggled Sheila came back with the played-out children she was immeasurably pleased with the thoughtfulness of the surprise.

The next morning Bret called her to the window to see how her namesake laughed with all her leaves in the early light. The two trees seemed to laugh together. "It's their honeymoon," he said. When he left the house old Gottlieb was shaking his head over the spectacle. Bret triumphantly cuffed him on the shoulder. "You see! I told you it would be all right."

"Vait once," said Gottlieb.

A few days before this Dorothy had called on Sheila to say that the church was getting up an open-air festival,

a farewell to the congregation about to disperse for the summer. They wanted to borrow the Winfield lawn.

Sheila consented freely. Also, they wanted to give a kind of masque. Masques were coming back into fashion and Vickery had consented to toss off a little fantasy, mainly about children and fairies, with one or two grown-ups to hold them together.

Sheila thought it an excellent idea.

Also, they wanted Sheila to play the principal part, the mother of the children.

Sheila declined with the greatest cordiality.

Dorothy pleaded. Sheila was adamant. She would work her head off and direct the rehearsals, she said, but she was a reformed actress who would not backslide even for the church.

Other members of the committee and even the old parson begged Sheila to recant, but she beamed and refused. Rehearsals began with Dorothy as the mother and Jim's sister Mayme as the fairy queen. Sheila's children and Dorothy's and a mob of others made up the rest of the cast, human and elfin.

Sheila worked hard, but her material was unpromising—all except her own daughter, whom she had named after Bret's mother and whom she called "Polly" after her own. Little Polly displayed a strange sincerity, a trace of the Kemble genius for pretending.

When Vickery, who came down to see his work produced and saw little Polly, it was like seeing again the little Sheila whom he still remembered.

He told big Sheila of it, and her eyes grew humid with tenderness.

He said, "I wrote my first play for you—and I'd be willing to write my last for you now if you'd act in it."

Sheila blessed him for it as if it were a beautiful obituary for her dead self. He did not tell her that he was writing her into his masterpiece, that she was posing for him even now.

CLIPPED WINGS

On the morning of the performance Miss Mayme Greeley woke up with an attack of hay-fever in full bloom. The June flowers had filled her with a kind of powder that went off like intermittent skyrockets. She began to pack her trunk for immediate flight to a pollenless clime. It looked as if she were trying to sneeze her head into her trunk. There was no possibility of her playing the fairy queen when her every other word was ker-choo!

Sheila saw it coming. Before the committee approached her like a press-gang she knew that she was drafted. She knew the rôle from having rehearsed it. Mayme's costume would fit her, and if she did not jump into the gap the whole affair would have to be put off.

These were not the least of the sarcasms fate was lavishing on her that her wicked past as an actress, which had kept her under suspicion so long, should be the means of bringing the village to her feet; that the church should drive her back on the stage; that the stage should be a plot of grass, that her own children should play the leading parts, and she be cast for a "bit" in their support.

Thus it was that Sheila returned to the drama, shanghaied as a reluctant understudy. The news of the positive appearance of the great Mrs. Winfield—"Sheila Kemble as was, the famous star, you know"—drew the whole town to the Winfield lawn.

The stage was a level of sward in front of the two birches, with rhododendron-bushes for wings. The audience filled the terraces, the porches, and even the surrounding trees.

The masque was an unimportant improvisation that Vickery had jingled off in hours of rest from the labor of his big play, "Clipped Wings."

But it gained a mysterious charm from the setting. People were so used to seeing plays in artificial light among flat, hand-painted trees with leaves pasted on visible fish-nets, that actual sunlight, genuine grass, and trees in three dimensions seemed poetically unreal and unknown.

The plot of the masque was not revolutionary.

Dorothy played a mother who quieted her four clamoring children with fairy-stories at bedtime; then they dreamed that a fairy queen visited them and transported them magically in their beds to fairyland.

At the height of the revel a rooster cock-a-doodle-did, the fairies scampered home, the children woke up to find themselves out in the woods in their nighties, and they skedaddled. Curtain.

The magic transformation scene did not work, of course. The ropes caught in the trees and Bret's chauffeur and Gottlieb Hauf had to get a stepladder and fuss about, while the sleeping children sat up and the premature fairies peeked and snickered. Then the play went on.

Bret watched the performance with the indulgent contempt one feels for his unprofessional friends when they try to act. It puzzled him to see how bad Dorothy was.

All she had to do was to gather her family about her and talk them to sleep. Sheila had reminded her of this and pleaded:

"Just play yourself, my dear."

But Dorothy had been as awkward and incorrigible as an overgrown girl.

To the layman it would seem the simplest task on earth —to play oneself. The acting trade knows it to be the most complex, the last height the actor attains, if he ever attains it at all.

Bret watched Dorothy in amazement. He was too polite to say what he thought, since Jim Greeley was at his elbow. Jim was not so polite. He spoke for Bret when he groaned:

"Gee whiz! What's the matter with that wife of mine? She's put her kids to bed a thousand times and yet you'd swear she never saw a child in her life before. You'd swear nobody else ever did. O Lord! Whew! I'll get a divorce in the morning."

The neighbors hushed him and protested with compli-

ments as badly read and unconvincing as Dorothy's own lines. At last Sheila came on, in the fairy-queen robes. Everybody knew that she was Mrs. Winfield, and that there were no fairies, at least in Blithevale, nowadays.

Yet somehow for the nonce one fairy at least was altogether undeniable and natural and real. The human mother putting her chicks to bed was the unheard-of, the unbelievable fantasm. Sheila was convincing beyond skepticism.

At the first slow circle of her wand, and the first sound of her easy, colloquial, yet poetic speech, there was a hush and, in one heart-throb, a sudden belief that such things must be true, because they were too beautiful not to be; they were infinitely lovely beyond the cruelty of denial or the folly of resistance.

Bret's heart began to race with pride, then to thud heavily. First was the response to her beauty, her charm, her triumph with the neighbors who had whispered him down because he had married an actress. Then came the strangling clutch of remorse: What right had he to cabin and confine that bright spirit in the little cell of his life? Would she not vanish from his home as she vanished from the scene? Actually, she merely walked between the rhododendron-bushes, but it had the effect of a mystic escape.

There was great laughter when the children woke up and scooted across the lawn in their bed-gear, but the sensation was Sheila's. Her ovation was overwhelming. The women of the audience fairly attacked Bret with congratulations. They groaned, shouted, and squealed at him:

"Oh, your wife was wonderful! wonderful! WONderful! You must be SO PROUD of her!"

He accepted her tributes with a guilty feeling of embezzlement, a feeling that the prouder he was of her the more ashamed he should be of himself.

He studied her from a distance as she took her homage

in shy simplicity. She was happy with a certain happiness he had not seen on her face since he last saw her taking her last curtain calls in a theater.

Sheila was so happy that she was afraid that her joy would bubble out of her in disgraceful childishness. With her first entrance on the grassy "boards" she had felt again the sense of an audience in sympathy and in subjection, the strange clasp of hands across the footlights, even though there were no footlights. It was a double triumph because the audience was Philistine and little accustomed to the theater. But she could feel the pulse of all those neighbors as if they had but one wrist and she held that under her fingers, counting the leap and check of their one heart and making it beat as she willed.

The ecstasy of her power was closely akin, in so different a way, to what Samson felt when the Philistines that had rendered him helpless called him from the prison where he did grind, to make them sport:

"He said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth that I may lean upon them." As he felt his strength rejoicing again in his sinews, he prayed, "Strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

Nobody could be less like Samson than Sheila, yet in her capacity she knew what it was to have her early powers once more restored to her. And she bowed herself with all her might—"And the house fell."

An almost inconceivable joy rewarded Sheila till the final spectator had italicized the last compliment. Then, just as Samson was caught under his own triumph, so Sheila went down suddenly under the ruination of her brief victory.

She was never to act again! She was never to act again!

When Bret came slowly to her, the last of her audience, she read in his eyes just what he felt, and he read in her

eyes just what she felt. They wrung hands in mutual adoration and mutual torment. But all they said was:

"You were never so beautiful! You never acted so well!" and "If you liked me, that's all I want."

The next morning Bret woke to a new and busy day after a night of perfect oblivion. Sheila did not get up, as her new habit was, but she reverted to type. She said that she had not slept and Bret urged her to stay where she was till she was rested.

Later, as he was knotting his tie, he glanced from the window as usual at the birches whose wedding he was so proud of. His hands paused at his throat and his fingers stiffened. He called, "Sheila! Sheila! Come look!"

He forgot that she had not risen with him. She lifted herself heavily from her pillow and came slowly to his side. She brushed back her heavy hair from her heavy eyes and said, "What is it?"

"Look at the difference in the birches. 'Bret' is bright and fine and every leaf is shining. But look at 'Sheila'!"

The Sheila tree seemed to have died in the night. The leaves drooped, shriveled, turning their dull sides outward on the black branches. The wind, that made the other tree glisten like breeze-shaken water, sent only a mournful shudder through her listless foliage.

CHAPTER LI

BRET turned with anxious, almost with superstitious query to Sheila. He found her wan and tremulous and weirdly aged. He cried out: "Sheila! What's the matter? You're ill!"

She tried to smile away his fears: "I had a bad night. I'm all right."

But she leaned on him, and when he led her back to bed she fell into her place like a broken tree. She was stricken with a chill and he bundled the covers about her, spread the extra blankets over her, and held her in his arms, but the lips he kissed shivered and were gray.

He was in a panic and begged her to let him send for the doctor, but she reiterated through her chattering teeth that she was "all right." When he offered to stay home from the office she ridiculed his fears and insisted that all she needed was sleep.

He left her anxiously, and came home to luncheon earlier than usual. He did not find Sheila on the steps to greet him. She was not in the hall. He asked little Polly where her mother was, and she said:

"Mamma's sick. She's been crying all day."

"No, I haven't," said Sheila; "I'm all right."

She was coming down the stairs; she was bravely dressed and smiling bravely, but she depended on the banister, and she almost toppled into Bret's arms.

He kissed her with terror, demanding: "What's the matter, honey? Please, please tell me what's the matter."

But she repeated her old refrain: "Why, I'm all right, honey! I'm perfectly all right!"

But she was not. She was broken in spirit and her nerves were in shreds.

Though she sat in her place at table, Bret saw that she was only pretending to eat. Dinner was the same story. And there was another bad night and a haggard morning.

Bret sent for the doctor in spite of her. He found only a general constitutional depression, or, as Bret put it, "Nothing is wrong except everything."

A week or two of the usual efforts with tonics brought no improvement. Meanwhile the doctor had asked a good many questions. It struck him at last that Sheila was suffering from the increasingly common malady of too much nervous energy with no work to expend it on. She must get herself interested in something. Perhaps a change would be good, a long voyage. Bret urged a trip abroad. He would leave the factory and go with her. Sheila did not want to travel, and she reminded him of the vital importance of his business duties. He admitted the truth of this and offered to let her go without him. She refused.

The doctor advised her to take up some active occupation. Bret suggested water-colors, authorship, pottery, piano-playing, the harp, vocal lessons—Sheila had an ear for music and sang very well, for one who did not sing. Sheila waved the suggestions aside one by one.

Bret and the doctor hinted at charity work. It is necessary to confess that the idea did not fascinate Sheila. She had the actor's instinct and plenteous sympathy, and had always been ready to give herself gratis to those benefit performances with which theatrical people are so generous, and whose charity should cover a multitude of their sins. But charity as a job! Sheila did not feel that going about among the sick and poverty stricken people would cheer her up especially.

The doctor as his last resort suggested a hobby of his own—he suggested that Sheila take up the art of hammer-

ing brass. He had found that it worked wonders with some of his patients.

Sheila, not knowing that it was the doctor's favorite vice and that his home was full of it, protested: "Hammered brass! But where would I hide it when I finished it? No, thank you!"

She said the same to every other proposal. You can lead a woman to an industry, but you cannot make her take it up. Still Bret agreed with the doctor that idleness was Sheila's chief ailment. There was an abundance of things to do in the world, but Sheila did not want to do them. They were not to her nature. Forcing them on her was like offering a banquet to a fish. Sheila needed only to be put back in the water; then she would provide her own banquet.

Bret gave up trying to find occupations for her. The summer did not retrieve her strength as he hoped. She tired of beaches and mountains and family visitations.

In Bret's baffled anxiety he thought perhaps it was himself she was so sick of; that love had decayed. But Sheila kept refuting this theory by her tempests of devotion.

He knew better than the doctor did, better than he would admit to himself, what was the matter with her. She wanted to go on the stage, and he could not bear the thought of it. Neither could he bear the thought of her melancholia.

If Sheila had stormed, complained, demanded her freedom he could have put up a first-class battle. But he could not fight the poor, meek sweetheart whose only defense was the terrible weapon of reticence, any more than he could fight the birch-tree that he had brought from its native soil.

The Sheila tree made a hard struggle for existence, but it grew shabbier and sicker, while the Bret tree, flourishing and growing, offered her every encouragement to prosper where she was. But she could not prosper.

One evening when Bret came home, nagged out with

factory annoyances, he saw old Gottlieb patting the trunk of the Sheila tree and shaking his head over it. Bret went to him and asked if there were any hope.

There were tears in Gottlieb's eyes. He scraped them off with his wrist-bone and sighed:

"*Die arme schöne Birke.* Ain't I told you she don't like? She goink die. She goink die."

"Take her back to the sunlight, then," said Bret.

But Gottlieb shook his head. "*Jetzt ist's all zu spät.* She goink die."

Bret hurried on to the house, carrying a load of guilt. Sheila was lying on a chair on the piazza. She did not rise and run to him. Just to lift her hand to his seemed to be all that she could achieve. When he dropped to his knee and embraced her she seemed uncannily frail.

The servant announcing dinner found him there.

Bret said to Sheila, "Shall I carry you in?"

She declined the ride and the dinner.

Bret urged, "But you didn't eat anything for lunch."

"Didn't I? Well, no matter."

He stared at her, and Gottlieb's words came back to him. The two Sheilas would perish together. He had taken them both from the soil where they had first taken root. Neither of them could adapt herself to the new soil. It was too late to restore the birch to its old home. Was it too late to save Sheila?

He would not trust the Blithevale fogies longer. She should have the best physician on earth. If he were in New York, well and good; if he lived in Europe, they would hunt him down. Craftily he said to Sheila:

"How would you like to take a little jaunt to New York?"

"No, thanks."

"With me. I've got to go."

"I'm sorry I can't; but it will be a change for you."

"I'll be lonely without you."

"Not in New York," she laughed.

"In heaven," he said, and the extravagance pleased her. He took courage from her smile and pleaded: "Come along. You can buy a raft of new clothes."

She shook her head even at that!

"You could see a lot of new plays."

This seemed to waken the first hint of appetite. She whispered, "All right; I'll go."

CHAPTER LII

PARIS fashions rarely get a good word from men or a bad word from women. The satirists and the clergy and native dressmakers who do not import have delivered tirades in all languages against them for centuries. They are still giving delight and refreshment from the harems on the Bosporus to the cottages on the Pacific and the rest of the way around the world.

The doctors have not seemed to recognize their medicinal value. They recommend equally or even more expensive changes of occupation or of climate which work a gradual improvement at best in the condition of a failing woman.

But for instant tonic and restorative virtue there is nothing to match the external application of a fresh Paris gown. For mild attacks a Paris hat may work, and where only domestic wares are obtainable they sometimes help, if fresh. For desperate cases both hat and gown are indicated.

Mustard plasters, electric shocks, strychnia, and other remedies have nothing like the same potency. The effect is instantaneous, and the patient is not only brought back to life, but stimulated to exert herself to live up to the gown. Husbands or guardians should be excluded during the treatment, as the reaction of Paris gowns on male relatives is apt to cause prostration. There need be no fear, however, of overdosing women patients.

As a final test of mortality, the Paris gown has been strangely overlooked. Holding mirrors before the lips, lifting the hands to the light, and like methods sometimes fail of certainty. If, however, a Paris gown be

held in front of the woman in question, and the words "Here is the very newest thing from Paris just smuggled in" be spoken in a loud voice, and no sign of an effort to sit up is made, she is dead, and no doubt of it.

Bret had decoyed Sheila to New York with an elaborate story of having to go on business and hating to go alone. When they arrived she was so weak that Bret wanted to send a red-cap for a wheeled chair to carry her from the train to the taxicab. Her pride refused, but her strength barely sufficed the distance.

Bret chose the Plaza for their hotel, since it required a ride up Fifth Avenue. His choice was justified by the interest Sheila displayed in the shop windows. She tried to see both sides of the street at once.

She was as excited as a child at Coney Island. She astounded Bret by gifts of observation that would have appalled an Indian scout.

After one fleeting glance at a window full of gowns she could describe each of them with a wealth of detail that dazzled him and a technical terminology that left him in perfect ignorance.

At the hotel she displayed unsuspected vigor. She needed little persuasion to spend the afternoon shopping. He was afraid that she might faint if she went alone, and he insisted that his own appointments were for the next day.

He followed her on a long scout through a tropical jungle of dressmakers' shops more brilliant than an orchid forest. Sheila clapped her hands in ecstasy after ecstasy. She insisted on trying things on and did not waver when she had to stand for long periods while the fitters fluttered about her. She promenaded and preened like a bird-of-paradise at the mating season. She was again the responsive, jocund Sheila of their own seaside mating period.

She found one audacious gown and a more audacious hat that suited her and each other without alterations.

And since Bret urged it, she let him buy them for her to wear that night at the theater. She made appointments for further fittings next day.

On the way to the hotel she tried to be sober long enough to reproach herself for her various expenditures, but Bret said:

"I'd mortgage the factory to the hilt for anything that would bring back that look to your face—and keep it there."

At the hotel they discussed what play they should see. The ticket agent advised the newest success, "Twilight," but Sheila knew that Floyd Eldon was featured in the cast and she did not want to cause Bret any discomfort. She voted for "Breakers Ahead" at the Odeon, though she knew that Dulcie Ormerod was in it. Dulcie was now established on Broadway, to the delight of the large rural-minded element that exists in every city.

Bret bought a box for the sake of the new gown. It took Sheila an age to get into it after dinner, but Bret told her it was time well spent. When they reached the theater the first act was well along, and in the otherwise deserted lobby Reben was talking to Starr Coleman concerning a learned interview he was writing for Dulcie.

Both stared at the sumptuous Delilah floating in at the side of Bret Winfield. They did not recognize either Bret or Sheila till Sheila was almost past them. Then they leaped to attention and called her by name.

All four exchanged greetings with cordiality. Time had blurred the old grudges. The admiration in the eyes of both Reben and Coleman reassured Sheila more than all the compliments they lavished.

Reben ended a speech of Oriental floweriness with a gracious implication: "You are coming in at the wrong door of the theater. This is the entrance for the sheep. The artists— Ah, if we had you back there now!"

Bret whitened and Sheila flushed. Then they moved on. Reben called after her, laughingly:

"I've got that contract in the safe yet."

It was a random shot, but the arrow struck. When the Winfields had gone on Reben said to Coleman:

"She's still beautiful—she is only now beautiful."

Coleman, whose enthusiasms were exhausted on his typewriting machine, agreed, cautiously: "Ye-es, but she's aged a good deal."

Reben frowned. "So you could say of a rosebud that has bloomed. She was pretty then and clever and sweet, but only a young thing that didn't know half as much as she thought she did. Now she has loved and suffered and she has had children and seen death maybe, and she has cried a lot in the night. Now she is a woman. She has the tragic mask, and I bet she could act—my God! I know she could act—if that fellow didn't prevent."

"Fellow" was not the expression he used. Reben abhorred Bret even more than Bret him.

Once more Sheila was in the Odeon, but as one of the laity. When she entered the dark auditorium her eyes rejoiced at the huge, dusty, gold arch of the proscenium framing the deep brilliant canvas where the figures moved and spoke. It was a finer sight to her than any sunset or seascape or any of the works of mere nature, for they just happened; these canvas rocks and cloth flowers were made to fit a story. She preferred the human to the divine, and the theatrical to the real.

The play was good, the company worthy of the Odeon traditions. Even Dulcie was not bad, for Reben had subtly cast her as herself without telling her so. She played the phases of her personality that everybody recognized but Dulcie. The play was a comedy written by a gentle satirist with a passion for making a portrait of his own times. The character Dulcie enacted was that of a pretty and well-meaning girl of a telephonic past married into a group of snobs, through having fascinated a rich man with her cheerful voice. Dulcie could play

innocence and amiability, for she was not intelligent enough to be anything but innocent, even in her vices, and she usually meant well even when she did her worst.

The author had selected Dulcie as his ideal for the rôle, but he had been at a loss how to tell her to play herself without hurting her feelings. She saved him by asking:

"Say, listen, should I play this part plebean or real refined?"

He hastened to answer, "Play it real refined."

And she did. She was delicious to those who understood; and to those who didn't she was admirable. Thus everybody was pleased.

Sheila would have enjoyed the rôle as a *tour de force*, or what she called a stunt, of character-playing. But she was glad that she was not playing it. She felt immortal longings in her for something less trivial than this quaint social photograph; something more earnest than any light satire.

She did not want to play that play, but she wanted to play—she smoldered with ambition. Her eyes reveled in the splendor of the theater, the well-groomed informality of the audience so eager to be swayed, in the boundless opportunity to feed the hungry people with the art of life. She felt at home. This was her native land. She breathed it all in with an almost voluptuous sense of well-being.

Bret, eying her instead of the stage, caught that contentment in her deep breathing, the alertness of her very nostrils relishing the atmosphere, the vivacity of her eager eyes. And his heart told him what her heart told her, that this was where she belonged.

He leaned close to her and whispered, "Don't you wish you were up there?"

She heard the little clang of jealousy in his mournful tone, and for his sake she answered, "Not in the least."

He knew that she lied, and why. He loved her for her love of him, but he felt lonely.

Dulcie did not send for Sheila to come back after the play. Broadway stars are busy people, with many suppliants for their time. Dulcie had no time for ancient history.

Sheila was glad to be spared, but did not misunderstand the reason. As she walked out with the audience she did not feel the aristocracy of her wealth and her leisure. She wanted to be back there in her dressing-room, smearing her features into a mess with cold-cream and recovering her every-day face from her workaday mask.

Bret and she supped in the grand manner, and Sheila had plenty of stares for her beauty. But she could see that nobody knew her. Nobody whispered: "That's Sheila Kemble. Look! Did you see her in her last play?" It was not a mere hunger for notoriety that made her regret anonymity; it was the artist's legitimate need of recognition for his work.

She went back to the hotel and took off her fine plumage. It had lost most of its warmth for her. She had not earned it with her own success. It was the gift of a man who loved her body and soul, but hated her mind.

Sheila was very woman, and one Paris gown and the prospect of more had lifted her from the depths to the heights. But she was an ambitious woman, and clothes alone were not enough to sustain her. In her situation they were but gilding on her shackles. The more gorgeously she was robed the more restless she was. She was in the tragi-comic plight of the man in the doleful song, "All dressed up and no place to go!"

Fatigue enveloped her, but it was the fag of idleness that has seen another day go by empty, and views ahead an endless series of empty days like a freight-train.

She tried to comfort Bret's anxiety with boasts of how well she was, but she fell back on the pitiful refrain, "I'm all right." If she had been all right she would not have said so; she would not have had to say so.

Both lay awake and both pretended to be asleep. In the two small heads lying as motionless on the pillows as melons their brains were busy as ant-hills after a storm. Eventually both fell into that mysterious state called sleep, yet neither brain ceased its civil war.

Bret was wakened from a bitter dream of a broken home by Sheila's stifled cry. He spoke to her and she mumbled in her nightmare. He listened keenly and made out the words:

"Bret, Bret, don't leave me. I'll die if I don't act. I love you, I love my children. I'll take them with me. I'll come home to you. Don't hate me. I love you."

Her voice sank into incoherence and then into silence, but he could tell by the twitching of her body and the clutching of her fingers that she was still battling against his prejudice.

He wrapped her in his arms and she woke a little, but only enough to murmur a word of love; then she sank back into sleep like a drowning woman who has slipped from her rescuer's grasp.

He fell asleep again, too, but the daybreak wakened him. He opened his eyes and saw Sheila standing at the window and gazing at her beloved city, her Canaan which she could see but not possess.

She shook her head despairingly and it reminded him of the old gardener's farewell to the birch-tree that must die.

She looked so eery there in the mystic dawn; her gown was so fleecy and her body so frail that she seemed almost translucent, already more spirit than flesh. She seemed like the ghost, the soul of herself departed from the flesh and about to take flight.

Bret thought of her as dead. It came to him suddenly with terrifying clarity that she was very near to death; that she could not live long in the prison of his love.

He was the typical American husband who hates tyranny so much that he would rather yield to his wife's

tyranny than subject her to his own. He took no pride in the thought of sacrificing any one on the altar of his self, and least of all did he want Sheila's bleeding heart laid out there.

The morning seemed to have solved the perplexities of the night; chill and gray, it gave the chill, gray counsel: "She will die if you do not return her where you found her." He vowed the high resolve that Sheila should be replaced upon the stage.

The pain of this decision was so sharp that when she crept back to bed he did not dare to announce it. He was afraid to speak, so he let her think him asleep.

That morning Sheila was ill again, old again, and jaded with discontent. He reminded her of her appointments with the dressmakers, but she said that she would put them off—or, better yet, she would cancel the orders.

He had their breakfast brought to the room, and he chose the most tempting luxuries he could find on the bill of fare. Nothing interested her. He suggested a drive in the Park. She was too tired to get up.

Suddenly he looked at his watch, snapped it shut, rose, said that he was late for his conference. She asked him what time it was, and he did not know till he looked at his watch again. He kissed her and left her, saying that he would lunch down-town.

CHAPTER LIII

THOUGH there was a telephone in their rooms, Bret went down to the public booths. He remembered Eugene Vickery's tirade about the crime of Sheila's idleness. He telephoned to Vickery's apartments and told Vickery that he must see him at once. Vickery answered:

"Sorry I can't ask you up or come to where you are this morning, but the fact is I'm at the last revision of my new play and I can't leave it while it's on the fire. Meet me at the Vagabonds Club and we'll have lunch, eh?—say, at half past twelve."

Bret reached the club a little before the hour. Vickery had not come. The hall captain ushered Bret into the waiting-room. He sat there feeling a hopeless outsider. "The Vagabonds" was made up chiefly of actors. From where he sat, he could see them coming and going. He studied them as one looking down into a pool to see how curious fish behave or misbehave. They hailed each other with a simple cordiality that amazed him. The spirit was rather that of a fraternity chapter-house than of a city club, where every man's chair is his castle. Everything was without pose; nearly everybody called nearly everybody by his first name. There were evidences of prosperity among them. Through the window he could see actors, whose faces were familiar even to him, roll up in their own automobiles.

At one o'clock Vickery had not come, and a friend of Bret's, named Crashaw, who had grown wealthy in the steel business, caught sight of Bret and took him under

his wing, registered him in the guest-book and led him to the cocktail desk. Then Crashaw urged him to wait for the uncertain Vickery no longer, but to lunch with him. Bret declined, but sat with him while he ate.

Bret, still looking for proof that actors were not like other people, asked Crashaw what the devil he was doing in that galley.

"It's my pet club," said Crashaw, "and I belong to a dozen of the best. It's the most prosperous and the most densely populated club in town, and the only one where a man can always find somebody in a cheerful humor at any hour of the day or night, and I like it best because it's the only club where people aren't always acting."

"What!" Bret exclaimed.

"I mean it," said Crashaw. "In the other clubs the millionaire is always playing rich, the society man always at his lah-de-dah, the engineer or the painter or the athlete is always posing. But these fellows know all about acting and they don't permit it here. So that forces them to be natural. It's the warmest-hearted, gayest-hearted, most human, clubbiest club in town, and you ought to belong."

Bret gasped at the thought and rather suspected Crashaw than absolved the club.

Bret was introduced to various members, and even his suspicious mind could not tell which were actors and which business men, for there are as many types of actor as there are types of mankind, and as many grades of prosperity, industry, and virtue.

Some of the clubmen joined Bret's group, and he was finally persuaded to give Vickery up for lost and eat his luncheon with an eminent tragedian who told uproarious stories, and the very buffoon who had conquered him at the benefit in the Metropolitan Opera House. The buffoon had an attack of the blues, but it yielded to the hilarity of the tragedian, and he departed recharged with electricity for his matinée, where he would coerce another mob into a state of rapture.

It suddenly came over Bret that this club of actors was as benevolent an institution in its own way as any monastery. Even the triumphs of players, which they were not encouraged to recount in this sanctuary, were triumphs of humanity. When an actor boasts how he "killed 'em in Waco" it does not mean that he shot anybody, took anybody's money away, or robbed any one of his pride or health; it means that he made a lot of people laugh or thrilled them or persuaded them to salubrious tears. It is the conceit of a benefactor bragging of his philanthropies. Surely as amiable an egotism as could be!

Bret was now in the frame of mind that Sheila was born in. He felt that the stage did a noble work and therefore conferred a nobility upon its people.

All this he was mulling over in the back of his head while he was listening to anecdotes that brought the tears of laughter to his eyes. He needed the laughter; it washed his bitter heart clean as a sheep's. Most of the stories were strictly men's stories, but those abound wherever men gather together. The difference was that these were better told.

Gradually the clatter decreased; the crowd thinned out. It was Wednesday and many of the actors had matinées; the business men went back to their offices. Still no Vickery.

By and by only a few members were left in the grill-room.

Bret had laughed himself solemn; now he was about to be deserted. Vickery had failed him, and he must return to that doleful, heartbroken Sheila with no word of help for her.

He had come forth to seek a way to compel her to return to the stage as a refuge from the creeping paralysis that was extinguishing her life. He hated the cure, but preferred it to Sheila's destruction. Now he was persuaded that the cure was honorable, but beyond his reach. He had heard many stories of the hard times upon the stage,

and of the unusual army of idle actors and actresses, and he was afraid that there would be no place for Sheila even though he was himself ready to release her.

Crashaw rose at length and said: "Sorry, old man, but I've got to run. Before I go, though, I'd like to show you the club. You can choose your own spot and wait for Vickery."

He led Bret from place to place, pointing out the portraits of famous actors and authors, the landscapes contributed by artist members, the trophies of war presented by members from the army and navy, the cups put up for fearless combatants about the pool-tables. He gave him a glimpse of the theater, where, as in a laboratory, experiments in drama and farce and musical comedy were made under ideal conditions before an expert audience.

Last he took him to the library. It was deserted save by somebody in a great chair which hid all but his feet and the hand that held a big volume of old plays. Crashaw went forward to see who it was. He exclaimed:

"What are you doing here, you loafer? Haven't you a matinée to-day?"

A voice that sounded familiar to Bret answered, "Ours is Thursday."

"Fine. Then you can take care of a friend of mine who's waiting for Vickery."

The voice answered as the man rose: "Certainly. Any friend of Vickery's—" Crashaw said:

"Mr. Winfield, you ought to know Mr. Floyd Eldon. Famous weighing-machine, shake hands with famous talking-machine."

The two men shook hands because Crashaw asked them to. He left them with a hasty "So long!" and hurried to the elevator.

It is a curious contact, the hand-clasp of two hostile men. It has something of the ritual value of the grip that precedes a prize-fight to the finish.

Once Bret's and Eldon's hands were joined, it was not easy to sever them. There was a kind of insult in being the first to relinquish the pressure. They looked at each other stupidly, like two school-boys who have quarreled. Neither could say a harsh word or feel a kind one. They had either to fight or to laugh.

Eldon was more used than Bret to speaking quickly in an emergency. He ended what he would have called a "stage wait" by lifting his left hand to his jaw, rubbing it, and smiling.

"It's some time since we met."

"Nearly five years, I guess," said Bret, and returned the compliment by rubbing his own jaw.

"We meet every few years," said Eldon. "I believe it's my turn to slug now."

"It is," said Bret. "Go on. I've found that I didn't owe you that last one. I misunderstood. I apologize." Bret said this not because of any feeling of cordiality, but because he believed it especially important not to be dishonest to an enemy.

Eldon, with equal punctilio and no more affection, answered: "I imagine the offense was outlawed years ago. I never knew what the cause of your anger was, but I'm glad if you know it wasn't true."

Silence fell upon them. Bret was wondering whether he ought to describe the injustice he had done Eldon. Eldon was debating whether it would be more conspicuous to ask about Sheila or to avoid asking about her. Finally he took a chance:

"And how is Mrs. Winfield?"

The question cleared the air magically. Bret said, "Oh, she's well, thank you, very well—that is, no, she's not well at all."

Bret had attempted a concealment of his cross, but the truth leapt out of him. Eldon was politely solicitous:

"Oh, I am sorry! Very sorry! She's not seriously ill, I hope."

"She's worse than ill. I'm worried to death!"

Eldon's alarm was genuine. "What a pity! Have you been to see a specialist? What seems to be the trouble?"

"She's pining away. She— I think I made a mistake in taking her off the stage. I think she ought to be at work again."

Eldon was as astounded at hearing this from Winfield as Bret at hearing himself say it. But Bret was in a panic of fear for Sheila's very life and he had to tell some one. Once he had betrayed himself so far, he was driven on:

"She won't admit it. She's trying to fight off the longing. But the battle is wearing her out. You see, we have two children. We have no quarrel with each other. We're happy—ideally happy together. She feels that she ought to be contented. She insists that she is. But—well, she isn't, that's all. I've tried everything, but I believe that the only hope of saving her is to get her back where she belongs. Idleness is killing her."

Eldon hid in his heart any feeling that might have surged up of disprized love finding itself vindicated. His thoughts were solemn and he spoke with earnestness:

"I believe you are right. You must know. I can quite understand. People laugh a good deal at actresses who come back after leaving the stage. They think it is a kind of craze for excitement. But it is better than that. The stage is still the only place where a woman's individuality is recognized and where she can be really herself.

"Sheila—er—Miss Kemble—pardon me—Mrs. Winfield has the theater in her blood, of course. Almost all the Kemble women have been actresses, and good ones. Your wife was a charming woman to act with. We fought each other—for points. I feel very grateful to her, for she gave me my first encouragement. She and her aunt, Mrs. Vining, taught me my first lessons. I grew very fond of them both and very grateful.

"There's a natural enmity between a leading woman and a leading man. They love each other as two rival

prize-fighters do. The better boxer each of them is, the better the fight. Sheila—your wife, always gave me a fight—on the stage—and after, sometimes, off the stage. She was a great actress—a born aristocrat of the theater."

Bret took fright at the word "was." It tolled like a passing-bell. He had made up his mind that Sheila should not be destroyed on his account. He had determined, after the morning's relapse, that he would restore his stolen sweetheart to her rightful owners as soon as he could. He would keep as close to her as might be. His business would permit him to make occasional journeys to Sheila. His mother would take care of the children and be enchanted with the privilege. Sometimes they could travel a little with Sheila.

His great-grandmother had crossed the plains in a prairie-schooner with five children, and borne a sixth on the way. That was considered praiseworthy in all enthusiasm. Wherein was it any worse for an actress to take her children with her?

There was no hiding from slander in any case, and he must endure the contempt of those who did not understand. The one unendurable thing was the ruination of his beloved's happiness, of her very life, even.

He had sought out Vickery as an old friend who knew the theater world. But Vickery had failed him. He dreaded to go back to Sheila without definite news.

Of all men he most hated to ask Eldon's help, but Eldon was the sole rescuer on the horizon. He threw off his pride and appealed to the man he had fought with.

"Mr. Eldon, you say you think my wife is a great artist. Will you help me to—to set her to work? I'm afraid for her, Mr. Eldon. I'm afraid that she is going to die. Will you help me?"

"Me? Will I help?" Eldon stammered. "What can I do? I'm not a manager, I have no company, no theater, hardly any influence."

Bret's courage went to pieces. He was a stranger in a

strange land. "I don't know any manager—except Reben, and he hates me. I don't know anything at all about the stage. I only know that my wife wants her career, and I'm going to get it for her if I have to build a theater myself. But that takes time. I thought perhaps you would know some way better than that."

Eldon was stirred by Bret's resolution. He said: "There must be a way. I'll do anything I can—everything I can, for the sake of the stage—and for the sake of an old colleague—and for the sake of—of a man as big as you, Mr. Winfield."

And now their hands shot out to each other without compunction or restraint and wrestled, as it were, in a tug of peace.

CHAPTER LIV

IT was thus that Eugene Vickery found them. His gasp of astonishment ended in a fit of coughing as he came forward, trying to express his amazement and his delight.

Bret seized his right hand, Eldon his left. Bret was horrified at the ghostly visage of his friend. Already it had a post-mortem look.

Vickery saw the shock in Bret's eyes. He dropped into a seat.

"Don't tell me how bad I look. I know it. But I don't care. I've finished my play! Incidentally my play has finished me. But what does that matter? I put into it all there was of me. That's what I'm here for. That's why there's nothing much left. But I'm glad. I've done all I can. *J'ai fait mon possible.* It's glorious to do that. And it's a good play. It's a great play—though I do say it that shouldn't. Floyd, I've got it!" He turned back to Bret. "Poor Floyd here has heard me read it a dozen times, and he's suggested a thousand changes. I was in the vein this morning. I worked all day yesterday, and all night till sunrise. Then I was up at seven. When you called me I was writing like a madman. And when the lunch hour came I was going so fast I didn't dare stop then even to telephone. I apologize."

"Please don't," said Bret.

"I see you've had your luncheon. Will you have another with me? I'm famished."

He rang for a waiter and ordered a substantial meal and then returned to Bret.

"How's Sheila?"

"She—she's not well."

"What a shame! She ought to be at work and I wish to the Lord she were. I may as well tell you, Bret, that I took the liberty of imagining Sheila as the principal woman of my play. And now that it's finished, I can't think of anybody who fills the bill except your wife. There are thousands of actresses starving to death, but none of them suits my character. None of them could play it but your Sheila."

"Then for God's sake let her play it!" Bret groaned.

Vickery, astonished beyond surprise, mumbled, "What did you say?"

Bret repeated his prayer, explained the situation to the incredulous Vickery, apologized for himself and his plight. Vickery's joy came slowly with belief. The red glow that spotted his cheeks spread all over his face like a creeping fire.

When he understood, he murmured: "Bret, you're a better man than I thought you were. Whether or not you've saved Sheila's life, you've certainly saved mine." A torment of coughing broke down his boast, and he amended, "Artistically, I mean. You've saved my play, and that's all that counts. The one sorrow of mine was that when I had finished it there was no one to give it life. But what if Sheila doesn't like it? What if she refuses!"

His woe was so profound that Bret reached across the table and squeezed his arm—it was hardly more than a bone. Bret said, "I'll make her like it!"

"She's sure to," Eldon said.

Vickery broke in: "You ought to hear him read it. Sometimes he reads a doubtful scene to me. Then it sounds greater to me than I ever dreamed. A manuscript is like an electric-light bulb, all glass and brass and little loops of thread that don't mean anything. When the right actor reads it it fills with light like a

bowl of fire and shines into dark places." His mood was so grave that it influenced his language.

Bret said, "Let me take the manuscript to Sheila."

Vickery frowned. "It's not in shape for her eyes. It ought to be read to her."

"Come read it to her, then."

"My voice is gone and I cough all the time, but if—"

He paused. He did not dare suggest that Eldon read it for him. Eldon did not dare to volunteer. Bret did not dare to ask him. But at length, after a silence of crucial distress, he overcame himself and said, with difficulty:

"Perhaps Mr. Eldon would be—would be willing to read it."

"I should be very glad to," said Eldon in a low tone.

It was strange how solemn and tremulous they were all three over so small a matter. A razor edge is a small thing, but a most uncomfortable place to balance.

Vickery broke out with a revulsion to hope. "Great!" he exclaimed. "When?"

"This afternoon would please me best," said Bret, rather sickly, now that the business had gone so far. "If Mr. Eldon—"

"I am free till seven," said Eldon.

"I'll go back and ask Mrs. Winfield, if she hasn't gone out," said Bret, rising.

"I'll go fasten the manuscript together," said Vickery, rising.

"I'll go along and glance over the new scenes," said Eldon, rising.

"Telephone me at my place," said Vickery, "and let me know one way or the other as soon as you can. The suspense is killing."

They walked out on the steps of the club, and Bret hailed a passing taxicab. As he turned round he saw Eldon lifting Vickery into a car that was evidently his own, for he took the wheel.

The nearer he got to the hotel the more Bret repented of his rash venture, the uglier it looked from various angles. He hoped that Sheila would be at the dressmaker's, contenting herself with rhapsodies in silk.

But she was sitting at the window. She was dressed, but her eyes were dull as she turned to greet him.

"How are you, honey?" he asked.

"I'm all right," she sighed. The old phrase!

Then he knew he had crossed the Rubicon and must go forward. "Why didn't you go to your fitting?"

"I tried to, but I was too weak. I don't need any new clothes. How was your business talk?"

"I can't tell yet," he said, and, after a battle with his stage-fright, broached the most serious business of his life. He had a right to be a bad actor and he read wretchedly the lines he improvised on his own scenario. "By the way, I stumbled across Eugene Vickery this afternoon."

"Oh, did you? How is he?"

"Pretty sick. He's just finished a new play."

"Oh, has he?"

"He says it's the work of his life."

"Poor boy!"

"I don't think he'll write another."

"Great heavens! Is he so bad?"

"Terribly weak. I told him you were in town and he was anxious to see you."

"Why didn't you invite him up?"

"I did. He said he'd like to come this afternoon if you were willing."

"By all means. Better call him up at once."

Bret went to the telephone, but turned to say, trying to be casual, "He asked if you'd be interested in hearing his play."

"Indeed I would!" There was distinct animation in this. "Ask him to bring it along."

Bret cleared his throat guiltily. "I told him I was

sure you'd be dying to hear it, and he said he wondered if you would mind if he—er—brought along a friend to read it. Vick's voice is so weak, you know."

"I'm not in the mood for strangers, but if Vickery wants it, why—of course. Did he say who it was?"

"Floyd Eldon."

That name had a way of dropping into the air like a meteor. When two lovers have fought over an outsider's name that name always recurs with all its battle clamor. It is as hard to mention idly as "Gettysburg" or "Waterloo."

Sheila knew what Bret had said of Eldon, what he had thought of him and done to him. She was amazed, and it is hard not to look guilty when old accusations of guilt are remembered. Bret saw the sudden tensity in her hands where they held the arms of her chair. He felt a miserable return of the old nausea, the incurable regret of love that it can never count on complete possession of its love, past, present, and future. But he was committed now to the conviction that he could not keep Sheila behind bars, and had no right to try. He had given her back to herself and the world, as one uncages a bird, hoping that it will hover about the house and return, but never sure what will draw it, or whither, once it has climbed into the sky.

To escape the ordeal of watching Sheila, and the ordeal of being questioned, he called up Vickery's number and told him to come over at once, and added, "Both of you."

Then he hung up the receiver and went forward to face Sheila's eyes. He told her all that had happened except his appeal to Eldon and their conspiracy to get her back on the stage.

She was agitated immensely, and risked his further suspicion by setting to work to primp and to change her gown to one that her nature found more appropriate to such an audition.

Eldon and Vickery arrived while she was in the dressing-room, and Bret whispered to them:

"I haven't told her that the play is for her. Don't let her know."

This threw Eldon and Vickery into confusion, and they greeted Sheila with helpless insincerity.

She saw how feeble Vickery was and how well Eldon was, and both saw that she was not the Sheila that had left the stage. Eldon felt a resentment against Winfield for what time and discontent had wrought to Sheila, but he knew what the theater can do for impaired beauty with make-up and artifice of lights.

After a certain amount of small talk and fuss about chairs the reading began. To Bret it was like a death-warrant; to Vickery and Eldon it was a writ of habeas corpus; to Sheila it was like the single copy of a great romance that she could never own.

Eldon read without action or gesticulation and with almost no attempt to indicate dialect or characterization. But he gave hint enough of each to set the hearers' imagination astir and not enough to hamper it.

Outside in the far-below streets was a muffled hubbub of motors and street-cars. And within there was only the heavy elegance of hotel furniture. But the listeners felt themselves peering into the lives of living people in a conflict of interests.

The light in the room grew dimmer and dimmer as Eldon read, till the air was thick with the deep crimson of sunset straining across the roofs. It served as the very rose-light of daybreak in which the play ended, calling the husband and wife to their separate tasks in the new manhood and the new womanhood, outside the new home to which they should return in the evening, to the peace they had earned with toil.

Bret hated the play because he loved it, because he felt that it had a right to be and it needed his wife to

give it being; because it seemed to command him to sacrifice his old-fashioned home for the sake of the ever-demanding world.

Sheila made no comment at all during the reading. She might have been an allegory of attention.

Even when Eldon closed the manuscript and the play with the quiet word "Curtain" Sheila did not speak. The three men watched her for a long hushed moment, and then they saw two great tears roll from the clenched eyes.

She murmured, feebly: "Who is the lucky woman that is to—to create it?"

"You!" said Bret.

Woman-like, Sheila's first emotion at the vision of her husband urging her to go back on the stage was one of pain and terror. She stared at Bret through the tears evoked by Vickery's art, and she gasped: "Don't you love me any more? Are you tired of me?"

"Oh, my God!" said Bret.

But when he collapsed Vickery took the floor and harangued her till she yielded, to be rid of him and of Eldon, that she might question her husband.

CHAPTER LV

WHEN they were alone Bret explained his decision and the heartbreaking time he had had arriving at it. He would not debate it again. He permitted Sheila the consolation of feeling herself an outcast, and she reveled in misery. But the first rehearsal was like a bugle-call to a cavalry horse hitched to a milk-wagon.

She entered the Odeon Theater again by the back door and bowed to the same old man, who smiled her in with bleary welcome. And Pennock was at her post looking as untheatrical as ever. She embraced Sheila and said, "It's good to see you workin' again."

The next person she met was Mrs. Vining, looking as time-proof as ever.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Sheila cried.

And Mrs. Vining sighed. "Oh, there's an old catty mother-in-law in the play, and Reben dragged me out of the Old Ladies' Home to play it."

Sheila's presence at the Odeon was due to the fact that when Eldon asked Reben to release him so that he might play in "Clipped Wings," with Sheila as star and Bret Winfield as the angel, Reben declined with violence.

When Eldon told him of the play he demanded the privilege of producing it. He ridiculed Bret as a theatrical manager and easily persuaded him to retire to his weighing-machines. Reben dug out the yellowed contract with Sheila, had it freshly typed, and sent it to her, and she signed it with all the woman's terror at putting her signature to a mortgage.

One matinée day, as Sheila left the stage door, she met

Dulcie coming in to make ready for the afternoon's performance.

Dulcie clutched her with overacted enthusiasm and said: "Oh, my dear, it's so nice that you're coming back on the stage, after all these years. Too bad you can't have your old theater, isn't it? We're doomed to stay here forever, it seems. But—oh, my dear!—you mustn't work so hard. You look all worn out. Are you ill?"

Sheila retreated in as good order as possible, breathing resolutions to oust Dulcie from the star dressing-room and quench her name in the electric lights. That vow sustained her through many a weak hour.

But at times she was not sure of even that success. At times she was sure of failure and the odious humiliation of returning to Blithevale like a prodigal wife fed on husks of criticism.

Bret was called back to his factory by his business and by his request. He did not want to impede Sheila in any way. He had gone through rehearsals and try-outs with her once, and, as he said, once was plenty.

Sheila wept at his desertion and called herself names. She wept for her children and called herself worse names. She wept on Mrs. Vining at various opportunities when she was not rehearsing.

At length the old lady's patience gave out and she stormed, "I warned you not to marry."

"You warned me not to marry in the profession, and I didn't."

"Well," sniffed Mrs. Vining, "I supposed you had sense enough of your own not to marry outside of it."

"But—"

"And now that you did, take your medicine. You're crying because you want to be with your man and your children. But when you had them you cried just the same. All the women I know on the stage and off, married and single, childless or not, are always crying about something. Good Lord! it's time women learned to get along

without tears. Men used to cry and faint, and they outgrew it. Women don't faint any more. Why can't they quit crying? The whole kit and caboodle of you make me sick."

"Thank you!" said Sheila, and walked away. But she was mad enough to rehearse her big scene more vigorously than ever. Without a slip of memory she delivered her long tirade so fiercely that the company and Vickery and Batterson broke into applause. From the auditorium Reben shouted, "Bully!"

As Sheila walked aside, Mrs. Vining threw her arms around her and called her an angel and proved that even she had not lost the gift of tears.

Bret was not without his own torments. The village people drove him frantic with their questions and their rapturous horror and the gossip they bandied about.

His mother, who hurried to the "rescue" of his home and his "abandoned children," strengthened him more by her bitterness against Sheila than she could have done by any praise of her. A man always discounts a woman's criticism of another woman. It always outrages his male sense of fairness and good sportsmanship.

Besides, Bret was driven by every reason of loyalty to defend his wife. He told his mother and his neighbors that he would see her oftener than a soldier or a sailor sees his wife. He would keep close to her. His business would permit him to make occasional journeys to her. Their summers would be honeymoons together.

He made good use of the *argumentum ad feminam* by telling his mother how well the children would profit by their grandmother's wisdom, and he promised them the fascinating privilege of traveling with their mother at times.

But it was not easy for Bret. He knew that many people would laugh at him for a milksop; others would despise him for a complacent assistant in his wife's dis-

honor. At times the dread of this gossip drove him almost mad.

He had his dark hours of jealous distrust, too, and the very thought of Eldon filled him with dread. Eldon was gifted and handsome, and congenial to Sheila, and a fellow-artist as well. And his other self, the Iago self that every Othello has, whispered that hateful word "propinquity" in his ear with vicious insinuation.

He gnashed his teeth against himself and groaned, "You fool, you've thrown her into Eldon's arms."

His better self answered: "No, you have given her to the arms of the world. Propinquity breeds hatred and jealousy and boredom and emulation as often as it breeds love."

He would have felt reassured if he had seen Sheila fighting Eldon for points, for positions, and for lines.

There was one line in Eldon's part that Sheila called the most beautiful line in the play, a line about the husband's dead mother. Sheila first admired then coveted the line.

At last she openly asked for it. Eldon was furious and Vickery was aghast.

"But, my dear Sheila," he explained, "you couldn't use that line. Your mother is present in the cast."

"Couldn't we kill her off?" said Sheila.

"I like that!" cried Mrs. Vining, who was playing the part.

Sheila gave up the line, but with reluctance. But it was some time before Eldon and Vickery regained their illusions concerning her.

And yet it was something more than selfish greed that made her grasp at everything for the betterment of her rôle. It was like a portrait she was painting and she wished for it every enhancement. An architect who plans a cathedral is not blamed for wishing to raze whole acres so that his building may command the scene. The actor's often berated avarice is no more ignoble, really. And the

actor who is indifferent or over-generous is like the careless artist in other fields. He builds neither himself nor his work.

Mrs. Vining fought half a day against the loss of a line that emphasized the meanness of her character. She wanted to be hated. She played hateful rôles with such exquisite art that audiences loved her while they loathed her.

So Sheila spared nothing and nobody to make the part she played the greatest part was ever played. Least of all she spared herself, her strength, her mind, her time. But she battened on work, she was a glutton for punishment. She had her stage-manager begging for a rest, and that is rare achievement.

And all the while she grew stronger, haler, heartier; she grew so beautiful from needing to be beautiful that even Dulcie Ormerod, passing her once more at the mail-box, gasped:

"My Gawd! but that hat is becoming. Tell me quick what's the address of your milliner."

That was approbation indeed from Dulcie.

At length the dreadful dress-rehearsal was reached. The usual unheard-of mishaps happened. Everybody was hopeless. The actors parroted the old saying that "a bad dress-rehearsal means a good first performance," knowing that it proves true about half the time.

The piece was tried first in Plainfield. The local audience was not demonstrative. Eldon tried to comfort himself by saying that the play was too big, too stunning, for them to understand.

The next night they played in Red Bank and were stunned with applause in the first scene and increasing enthusiasm throughout. But that proved nothing, and Jaffer, who was with the company, remembered a famous failure that had been a triumph in Red Bank and a disaster on Broadway.

The fear of that merciless Broadway gauntlet settled

over the company. Success meant everything to every member. It meant the paying of bills, a warm home for the winter, a step upward for the future. Even one of the stage-hands had a romance that required a New York run.

CHAPTER LVI

SOME of the provincial cities said the play was disgustingly immoral and the police ought to stop it. The accusation hurt. Was it immoral? A certain clergy man said the play was a sermon; a certain critic said it was vile. Which was true? It is not pleasant to be called vile even though the epithet has been hurled at many of the noblest.

The bitter discussion it aroused wounded Vickery mortally. Eldon told him that nothing was better for success than to arouse discussion, and that the final proof of great art is its ability to make a lot of people ferociously angry.

But Vickery would not be cheered up. He said that the bumps were killing him.

"You see, I'm so lean and weak, I've got no shock-absorbers. I can't do anything but cough like a damned he-Camille."

Sheila and Batterson and even Reben begged him to leave the company and go back to town. But he was in a frenzy for perfection. He was relentless with his own lines and scenes. He denounced them rabidly. He tore out pages of manuscript from the prompt-copy, and sat at the table writing new scenes while the rehearsals went on. Between the acts he wrote new lines. He wrote in a terrible hurry. He was in a terrible hurry.

But he was in a frenzy for perfection. He was relentless with the actors. Every word, every silence, was important to him as a link in his chain of gold.

Batterson and Reben and Sheila questioned many of

his words, phrases, and even whole scenes. Everybody had a more or less respectful criticism, a more or less brilliant contribution, but Vickery had had enough of this piecemeal microscopy.

"A play succeeds or falls by its big idea," he said, "by its big sweep, and nothing else matters. The greatest play in the world is 'Hamlet,' and it's so full of faults that a whole library has been written about it. But you can't kill its big points. What difference does it make how the shore-line runs if your ocean is an ocean? Let me alone, I tell you. Do my play the best you can, then we'll soon know if the public wants it.

"You ruined one play for me, Mr. Reben, but you can't monkey with this one. I thought of all the objections you've made and a hundred others when I was writing it. I liked it this way then, and I knew as much then as I do now—only I was red-hot at the time, and I'm not going to fool with it in cold blood."

There were arguments and instances enough against him, and Reben and Batterson showered him with stories of plays that had been saved from disaster by collaboration. He answered with stories of plays that had succeeded without it and plays that had crashed in spite of it.

"It's all a gamble," he cried. "Let's throw our coin on one number and either make or lose. Anyway, my contract says you can't alter a line without my consent, and you'll never get that. It's my last play, and it's my own play, and they've got to take it or leave it just as I write it."

They yielded more in deference to his feelings than to his art.

At last the company turned to charge down upon New York. They arrived at three o'clock on a Sunday morning.

As Sheila and Mrs. Vining rode through the streets to their hotel they saw on all sides the work of the ad-

vertising men. On bill-boards were big "stands" with Sheila's name in letters as big as herself. On smaller boards her full-length portrait smiled at her from "three sheets." In the windows were "half-sheets." Even the garbage-cans proclaimed her name.

Fame was a terrifying thing.

Sunday was given over to a prolonged dress-rehearsal beginning at noon and lasting till four the next morning. At about three o'clock in the afternoon Eugene Vickery in the midst of a wrangle over a scene was overcome with his illness.

A doctor who was brought in haste picked him up and carried him to a taxicab and sped with him to a hospital. The troupe was staggered like a line of infantry in which the first shell drops. Then it closed together and went on.

The next day Sheila visited Eugene and never found a rôle so hard to play as the character of Hope at the bedside of Despair.

The nurse would not let her stay long and forbade Vickery to talk, but he managed to whisper, brokenly:

"Don't worry about me. Don't think about me. Work for yourself and the play. That will be working for me. If it succeeds, it's a kind of a little immortality for me; if it fails—well, don't worry, I won't mind—then. Go and rest now. I've no strength to give you, or I'd make you as strong as a giant—you poor, brave, beautiful little woman! God bless you! Good luck!"

CHAPTER LVII

EIGHT o'clock and a section of Broadway is a throng of throngs, as if all the world were prowling for pleasure. At this theater or that, parts of the crowd turn in. Where many go there is success; but there are sad doorways where few cabs draw up and few people march to the lonely window; and that is a home of failure, though as much work has been done and as much money deserved. Only, the whim of the public is not for that place.

Eight o'clock and Sheila sits in her dressing-room in an ague of dread, painting her face and wondering why she is here, a lone woman fighting a mob for the sake of a dying man's useless glory, and for the ruin of a living man's schedule of life. Why is she not where Bret Winfield said a woman's place was—at home?

She wonders about Bret. If she fails, if she succeeds, what does it mean to him and her? She understands that he has left her alone till now because he could not help her. But no flowers, no telegram, nothing? She looks over the heap of telegrams—no, there is nothing from him.

Then a note comes. He is there. Can he see her? Her heart leaps with rapture, but she dares not see him before the play. She would cry and mess her make-up, and she must enter with gaiety. She sends Pennock with word begging him to come after the play is over—"if he still wants to—if he's not ashamed of me; tell him that."

She thinks of him wincing as he is turned away from the stage door. Then she banishes the thought of him, herself, everybody but the character she is to play.

Outside the curtain is a throng eager to be entertained, willing to pay a fortune for entertainment, but merciless to those who fail. There is no active hostility in the audience—just the passive inertia of a dull, dreary, anxious mob afraid of being bored and cheated of an evening.

"Here are our hearts," it says; "we are sick of our own lives. We do not care what your troubles are or your good intentions. We have left our homes to be made happy, or to be thrilled to that luxurious sorrow for some one else that is the highest happiness. We have come here at some expense and some inconvenience. We have a hard day ahead of us to-morrow. It is too late to go elsewhere. You have said you have a good show. Show us!"

Back of that glum curtain the actors, powdered, caparisoned, painted, wait in the wings like clowns for the crack of the whip—and yet also like soldiers about to receive the command to charge on trenches where unknown forces lie hidden. No one can tell whether they are to be hurled back in shame and confusion, or to sweep on in uproarious triumph. Their courage, their art, will be the same. The result will be history or oblivion, homage or ridicule.

It is an old story, an incessantly recurring story, a tragi-farce so commonplace that authors and actors and managers and critics make jokes of their failures and successes—afterward. But they are not jokes at the time.

It was no joke for the husband who had intrusted Sheila to the mercy of the public and the press, and who made one of the audience, though he quivered with an anguish of fear as each line was delivered, and an anguish of joy or woe as it scored or lapsed.

It was no joke to Eugene Vickery, lying in the quiet white room with the light low and one stolid stranger in white to sentinel him. It was hard not to be there where the lights were high, where the throngs heard his pen and ink made flesh and blood. It was hard not to know what

the words he had put on paper sounded like to New York —the Big Town of his people. He wanted to see and hear and his soul would have run there if it could have lifted his body. But that it could not do.

It could lift thousands of hands to applause and lift a thousand voices to cry his name, but it could not lift his own hands or his own voice.

The nurse, who did not understand playwrights, tried to keep him quiet. She kept taking the sheet from his hands where they kept tugging at its edge. She forbade him to talk. She refused to tell him what time it was.

But he would say, "Now the overture's beginning," and then, later, "Now the curtain's going up." He tried to rise with it, but she pressed him back. Later he reckoned that the first act was over, and then that the second act was begun.

Then a telephoned message was brought to him that Mr. Reben telephoned to say, "the first act got over great."

That almost lifted him to his feet, but he fell back, sighing, "He'd say it anyway, just to cheer me up."

The same message or better came after the other acts. But he would not believe, he dared not believe, till suddenly Sheila was there in her costume of the last act. The divine light of good news poured from her eyes. She had not waited to meet the people who crowded back to congratulate her—"and they never crowd after a failure," she said.

She had not waited to change her costume lest she be too late with her music. She had waited only for Bret to run to her and tell her how wonderful she was, and to crush him as hard as she could in her arms. Then she had haled him to the cab that was held in readiness, and they had dashed for Vickery's bed—his "throne," she called it.

Perhaps she exaggerated the excitement of the audience; perhaps she drew a little on prophecy in quoting what the critics had been overheard to say in praise of the drama—"epoch-making" was the least word she quoted.

But she brought in with her a very blast of beauty and of rapture, and she carried flowers that she would have flung across his bed if she had not suddenly feared the look of them there.

As for Vickery, he felt the beauty and fragrance of the triumphal red roses on the towering stems.

But he closed the great eyelids over the great eyes and inhaled the sweeter, the ineffable aroma of success. It was so sweet that he turned his face to the wall and sobbed.

Sheila tried to console him—console him for his triumph! She said: "Why, 'Gene, 'Gene, the play is a sensation! The royalties will be enormous. The notices will be glorious. You mustn't be unhappy."

He put out a hand that tried to be soft, he made a sound that tried to be a laugh, and he spoke in a sad rustle that tried to be a voice:

"I'm not unhappy. I never was happy till now. The royalties won't be necessary where I'm going—just a penny to pay the ferryman. The notices I'll read over there—I suppose they get the papers over there so that the obituary notices can be read—the first kind words some of us ever get from this world.

"I owe it to you two that my play got on and succeeded. Success! to write your heart's religion and have it succeed with the people—that's worth living for—that's worth dying for—"

His speech was frail, and broken with long pauses and with paroxysms:

"I hope I haven't ruined your lives for you two. But you weren't very happy when I came along, were you? Sheila was breaking your heart, Bret, just because she couldn't keep her own from breaking. You were like a man chained to a dead woman. If you had gone on, maybe you would have been less happy than you will be now. Look at poor Dorothy. How long will she stand her unhappiness? My royalties will go to her!

They will make her independent of that— But I've got no time to be bitter against anybody now.

"I hope you'll be happy, you two. But happiness isn't the thing to work for. The thing to work for is work—to do all you can with what you have. I'm a poor, weak, ramshackle sack of bones, but I've done what I could—and a little more. *J'ai fait mon possible.* That's all God or man can ask. Go on and do your possible, Bret—you in your factory—and Sheila in her factory. I can't see why your chance for happiness isn't as good as anybody's, if you'll be patient with each other and run home to each other when you can—and—and—now I've got to run home, too."

Then a deep peace soothed him, and them.

CURTAIN

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